

Life Balancing Through Community Service

**By Cathy Standiford
Assistant City Manager
City of Santa Ana**

As a woman in local government, I am frequently asked how I find balance between my work life and the rest of my life. What do I do to maintain perspective in a career that can at times be very challenging?

In answering that question, there are two things you need to know about me. First, I have been happily married for almost 18 years to a wonderful husband (John), and we have an adorable dog named Buddy. John and I chose not to have children, mainly because we didn't feel strongly enough about it. It is a choice we have not regretted, in part because it has given us the flexibility of time and financial resources to pursue other interests. Second, I was raised in a family which placed a high value on social justice and community service. So it is not surprising that one of my most rewarding "hobbies" is participating in a service organization that seeks to improve the lives of women and girls in local communities and throughout the world.

Early in my local government career, I felt something was missing in my life. After much reflection, I decided that I wanted to start giving back to the community that was paying my salary. I ended up joining Soroptimist International of Garden Grove, a service organization in the community where I happened to be working. Soroptimist International is similar to Kiwanis or Rotary, but has a unique focus on women and girls. Currently there are more than 93,000 Soroptimist members in 124 countries and territories around the world, and while each local club is different, our focus is essentially the same. I've now been a Soroptimist member for 18 years, and it has become an effective and rewarding means for bringing balance to my life, by providing a wide range of local and international service opportunities.

For example, my local club has a long-term relationship with a non-profit organization that provides housing and support services for teenage foster girls. We spend time with the girls, celebrate their birthdays and holidays with them, involve them in some of our other service activities, and try to help prepare them for the realities and challenges they will face when they "age out" of the foster care system. Spending time with the girls helps me appreciate my family upbringing, and the sacrifices my parents made for me and my siblings to ensure we got the love, education and support we needed to be successful.

Because Soroptimist is an international organization, however, I've also been able to gain perspective and balance through international service activities. For example, I've been to the Commission on the Status of Women meetings at the

United Nations twice, to advocate for the needs of women and girls on behalf of Soroptimist. Being at the UN and learning first hand about the state of the world's women is an eye-opening and sobering experience. Extreme poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, HIV/AIDS, war and conflict—all of these affect women and girls more profoundly. Such knowledge comes with incredible gratitude and appreciation for the life of blessings I've been given, and a firm desire to share more of those blessings with others. And so, I talk to my friends and neighbors about what I've learned, send advocacy letters to my elected officials, and do what I can to help women and girls through local and international Soroptimist projects. I focus on doing what I can do, instead of agonizing over what I can't do.

Last year I traveled to Rwanda, to meet women survivors of war being helped by a joint program between Soroptimist International and Women for Women International. I witnessed the transformative power of a little basic education, vocational training and peer support on these women, who had been traumatized by the country's genocide 14 years ago. Most of these women come to the program with nothing, and leave 12 months later with hope, self esteem, and respect. Many of them become elected leaders in their communities because of their willingness to share their knowledge with others. I've since become a sponsor of a Rwandan woman (the cost is about \$350 for one woman to go through the year-long program). Veneranda's letters never cease to inspire and motivate me. I know she works hard in the program—and it inspires me to work hard in my job, too.

It's true that I get paid for being of service to others as part of my career—but as result of my Soroptimist involvement I realize how important what we do in government is. Many governments around the world are so focused on maintaining peace and security that they lack resources for some of the basic services we enjoy and frankly take for granted here. Adequate water and sanitation, inexpensive public education, and relatively accessible health and social services--most of the world's population lacks the safety net that our government is able to make available to its citizens.

One of my favorite quotes is from Theodore Roosevelt, who said, "This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in, if it is not a reasonably good place for all of us to live in." Because we are truly part of a global economy, I've come to the conclusion that we need to take it a step further, and try to make the world a reasonably good place for everyone to live in. Being part of an international service organization gives me the rewarding opportunity to do just that—and brings balance and perspective to my life in the process.

(Note: For more information about Soroptimist International, please visit www.soroptimist.org.)