

Personal Journeys / Encore Careers

- **Kathy Standiford –February 2011**

I Didn't Retire—I Redirected

Encore Vignette by Cathy Standiford
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Sometimes an opportunity comes along that is so unique and exciting, it's impossible to resist pursuing. That happened to me in 2009, and it led me to quit my full-time job as an assistant city manager and redirect my career, first to international advocacy as the president of a volunteer organization, and then to local government consulting. This is the story of my journey and what I learned along the way.

Lesson One: Choices Feel Less Risky When Fueled by Passion

I have worked in government for over 27 years, serving three different communities in a variety of capacities including city manager and assistant city manager. Most of the managers I know struggle to maintain a sense of balance in their lives to offset the stress that comes with managing complex organizations and the diverse personalities of elected officials. Throughout most of my career I have balanced my professional life with active involvement in an organization known as Soroptimist International.

Soroptimist is an international volunteer organization for business and professional women, dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls in local communities and throughout the world. There are nearly 90,000 Soroptimist members in more than 120 countries and territories around the world. I joined the Soroptimist club in Garden Grove early in my career, because I wanted to give back to the community that was paying my salary. I was attracted to the international aspect of the organization and its focus on women and girls. Through Soroptimist I developed a passion not only for volunteering, but also for advocacy on women's issues.

A willingness to lead is highly prized in volunteer organizations. Over time I found myself elected to higher and higher Soroptimist leadership positions. In 2007 I began a two-year term on the board of board of directors for Soroptimist International of the Americas (SIA), which encompasses 19 countries including north, central and south America, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines. I was able to manage my Soroptimist involvement while working full time, and with the encouragement of my husband and friends, and the support of my boss, I decided to run for President of SIA. And I won!

The process for becoming President involves a one-year term as President elect. During that preparatory year I continued working full time as assistant city manager for the City of Santa Ana, using vacation leave for the travel to board meetings and region conferences that my volunteer position required. What I experienced during that year as President elect was a constant feeling of being pulled in two directions. When I was on vacation fulfilling Soroptimist responsibilities, there was inevitably some crisis or issue back at the City that would distract me. When I was at work, there was always something far more stimulating or interesting happening with Soroptimist that was equally distracting.

As the start of my presidential term grew near, I became more and more conflicted. I was confident I could handle my full-time job while serving as SIA President. But I ultimately came to the conclusion

that I didn't want to. This would be a once-in-a-lifetime, 12-month experience. I didn't want to have any regrets at the end of my term or skip Soroptimist opportunities to fulfill my work commitments. I shared these feelings with my husband, and we agreed on a plan.

Like many city managers and assistants, I had amassed a large "rainy day" fund over the years. My husband and I agreed that I would quit my full-time job and convert my "rainy day fund" into an "opportunity" fund that would allow me the freedom and flexibility to devote my energies to serving as SIA President full time. I would continue my occasional teaching, and explore part-time consulting. But my husband was willing to take on the role of primary breadwinner, to allow me to live this dream. For that I will be forever grateful.

As I was planning my departure from Santa Ana, I started talking to colleagues who had become consultants. They were candid about the benefits of consulting, and some of the challenges. I was primarily interested in Management Partners, because I had used their services before and had great respect for Jerry Newfarmer and the other people associated with the firm. After a few meetings to discuss the possibilities, I was offered the opportunity to join Management Partners as a part-time consultant through the firm's "transition to consulting" program.

I left the City of Santa Ana on August 27, 2009 and began my SIA presidency on September 1. City Manager Dave Ream was gracious and understanding, as were my colleagues and friends. Many people, particularly women, seemed inspired by my bold move. While I admit my decision to quit my job was risky, my passion for Soroptimist and what I felt I could do for women and girls during the coming year helped me push through my fears. Intuitively, I knew everything would work out fine.

Lesson Two: The World Is a Big Classroom

Serving on an international board of directors was a stimulating and highly educational experience. As President I had the opportunity to travel all over the world, supporting the efforts of Soroptimist members in our mission to help women and girls. In 12 months I visited Europe, the United Kingdom, Latin America, and Asia, as well as the United States and Canada. I learned how to pack light, managing to survive a two-week trip to Asia with just one suitcase. I re-learned Spanish well enough to give speeches and workshops in Panama and Ecuador in the native language of Soroptimists there. I learned about protocol and the art of gift giving in Japan, Taiwan and Korea. I learned that the mangos in the Philippines are among the best in the world.

One of my most memorable trips was to Sierra Leone, Africa, where I visited a project for teenage mothers and street children being funded by Soroptimist. The trip reinforced my gratitude and appreciation for clean water and sanitation, paved roads, and other infrastructure the developed world tends to take for granted, not to mention ready access to food, education and medical care. The reality is that most of the world's population lacks one or more of these basic things. The developed world operates at the pinnacle of Maslow's hierarchy of needs because the basic ones—food, water, shelter, security—are more or less taken care of.

I learned that the non-profit world has much to teach government, particularly about strategic planning and civic engagement. Successful non-profits use strategic planning to establish direction, stay on mission, and ensure smooth transition of board leadership from one year to the next. They use

performance measurement to measure the right things and enhance fact-based decision making and the efficient use of limited resources. In Sierra Leone I was inspired by our project partners who practice true community engagement that is based on conversations with communities and their leaders. Instead of trying to tell the community what it needs, they listen carefully to what the community says it needs, and then work to provide those things.

One of the issues affecting women and girls about which I am most passionate is human trafficking. Trafficking is modern-day slavery, and it exists in every community of the world, including here in the US. I used my position as President to raise awareness about this issue, since almost 80% of the victims of human trafficking are women and girls who have been tricked, coerced or forced into sexual servitude. My advocacy efforts took me to conferences, web-based talk radio shows, and even led to an appearance on CNN Headline News. I learned how to craft and deliver memorable speeches and good 10-second sound bites.

I also learned how to use social media. Throughout the year Soroptimists followed me on Facebook, Twitter and Linked In. I kept a “President’s Blog” that served as both an account of my travels and as a forum to draw attention to issues affecting women and girls and what we could be doing about them. The blog became so popular that I was asked to continue it after my term was over.

Lesson Three: Life after Redirecting Is Good

During my year as SIA President I continued to do project-based work for Management Partners. Most of my expectations of what it would be like to be a consultant were met. I discovered I liked the variety of work, the variety of clients, and the reward of providing practical recommendations clients can actually implement.

As the year drew to a close, I had to decide if I wanted to go back to working in a city or continue consulting. I created a list of the things I missed about working in local government and a list of things I didn’t miss. The list of things I missed (such as interacting with larger groups of people and having a well-defined work day) was much shorter than the list of things I didn’t miss. I didn’t miss late-night city council meetings, or the drama of election season. I got to watch Monday Night Football with my husband for the first time in years. Management Partners was happy with my work, and I was happy working for the firm. I am now working full-time as a consultant, and I really enjoy it. In other words, my “intuition” that things would work out fine turned out to be accurate.

If you are ever given the opportunity to redirect and do something bold—something that ignites your passion—remember the Latin phrase “carpe diem,” and seize the day!

Note: Cathy Standiford’s Focus on Women blog can be accessed at <http://focus.soroptimist.org>
