

Soroptimist

International of the Americas, Inc.®

Our Vision

Women and girls have the resources and opportunities to reach their full potential and live their dreams

Our Mission

Soroptimist is a global volunteer organization that provides women and girls with access to the education and training they need to achieve economic empowerment.

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SOROPTIMIST LIVE YOUR DREAM "WEBISODES" WIN PRESTIGIOUS TELLY AWARD

Series by Philadelphia video production company tells story of single mom on quest to change her life

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PHILADELPHIA, Pa.—Call it Kismet. A few years ago, Rich Tolsma, a fixture in the Philadelphia video production scene for more than 25 years, was attending a convention in Atlanta for fundraising professionals. His purpose was to drum up business for his production company, which does a lot of work for nonprofits. He met up with the development director of Soroptimist International of the Americas, which coincidentally is also based in Philadelphia.

Although he was not familiar with the organization, Tolsma was intrigued to learn about Soroptimist and its mission to improve the lives of women and girls. “The focus of our work is on telling the stories of non-profits,” said Tolsma. “So I was delighted to learn about this organization that is doing such great work on behalf of the world’s women and girls.”

Rich Tolsma Productions, whose clients include the American Breast Cancer Foundation, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and the School District of Philadelphia, derives much personal satisfaction from their work with non-profits. “I feel that non-profit organizations have the best stories to tell,” says Tolsma. “I have met homeless people, famous people and recovering drug addicts who all have one thing in common. They all have a story.”

A Philadelphia native, Tolsma has deep ties to his community. In addition to telling the stories through film of some of the area’s largest non-profits, he is a serious musician who sings with the Philadelphia Singers Chorale, the official chorus of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

After returning from the convention, Tolsma was contacted by Soroptimist to produce a new organizational video. Meanwhile, Soroptimist—an international organization that provides programs to help women improve their economic and social standing—was working on a new concept called the Live Your Dream campaign.



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“The campaign, and its online home at LiveYourDreamCampaign.org, encourages women from all walks of life to be their personal best,” states Leigh Wintz, Soroptimist’s executive director. “Our members and the public at large have responded quite positively to this inspirational concept and site.”

Soroptimist’s core program is its Women’s Opportunity Awards, which provide cash grants for women—usually single moms—to get additional education or training and improve their employment prospects. Many of the women overcome enormous obstacles including poverty, sexual and physical abuse, and addiction in order to get their lives back on track.

The organization decided, in consultation with Tolsma, to feature the story of a past Women’s Opportunity Award recipient on the Live Your Dream website. And Sena Kimbrell of Tucson, Arizona, fit the bill perfectly. Kimbrell, a 34-year-old single mother, learned tenacity at an early age. Born prematurely at 2 lbs. with underdeveloped organs and damaged retinas from her stay in an incubator, Kimbrell had to fight for her very life. After being released from the hospital, she went home to an unstable mother, an alcoholic father, and a family so poor they often had no heat and sometimes used a hair dryer for warmth. Luckily, Kimbrell’s grandparents took her in when she was 2. Though they lacked financial resources, they provided their granddaughter with a loving home and exposure to dance, music and other opportunities.

Today Kimbrell returns that love by caring daily for her ailing, aging grandparents. That responsibility is in addition to raising her 11-year-old son, Zain; holding down a full-time schedule at community college; and running her own plant care business. She maintains a whirlwind schedule that would defeat lesser people. Upon earning an associate degree at Pima Community College, Kimbrell plans to enroll in the Arizona School of Acupuncture, where she will study for a doctorate in Oriental medicine.

When asked how she does it, Kimbrell states matter-of-factly, “I just keep going. I don’t look back.”

Last winter, Tolsma flew down to Tucson for a few days to document Kimbrell’s struggles and triumphs in video. The resulting four-part webisode series, *This is My Dream: Sena Kimbrell*, was launched on Soroptimist’s Live Your Dream website on March 8, International Women’s Day.

The webisode series has inspired visitors with Kimbrell’s message of hope and determination. The experience of sharing her story has bolstered Kimbrell personally, who says, “I’m living my truth and living my dream. I feel so happy I can share that with others.”

Rich Tolsma was touched by this particular job. “Sena is such an amazing person. Her energy and enthusiasm are contagious,” he says. “I was so excited to help her tell her story. She was the perfect subject.” Recently Soroptimist and Tolsma learned the webisode series had won the 29th Telly Award competition’s bronze-level distinction in the not-for-profit film and video category. The webisode series was chosen from among 14,000 entries from top agencies, production companies, TV stations, cable companies and corporations in the world. “I am proud of the award. But what’s even more meaningful to me is that by telling Sena’s story, I am helping other

women who are on a journey to live their dreams,” says Tolsma, who has kept in touch with Kimbrell and hopes to show her around Philadelphia when she comes east with her son this summer.

In addition to the Telly Award, the Live Your Dream campaign and website have also won the Communicator Award and the MarComm award. Next year, Soroptimist plans to hire Tolsma to produce a new webisode series on another past Women’s Opportunity Award recipient.

“Sena’s story, told so beautifully in Rich’s video, has resonated with everyone who’s seen it,” states Wintz. “She represents so many other women who, through their own determination and a little help from organizations like Soroptimist, power through the obstacles and make their dreams their own. They are everyday heroes. I never tire of learning their stories and I never cease to be inspired by them—each and every day.”

For more information, contact Darlene Friedman, darlene@soroptimist.org.

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