

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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Second Sheet

WHAT IF?

One cold and snowy Christmas Eve, George Bailey, of Bailey Brothers' Building and Loan, has a crisis of faith. His uncle had lost a large deposit to the family bank, and George was about to face financial ruin. Despondent, he questions whether his life was worth living.

Enter Clarence, Angel 2nd Class, who is assigned to save George in order to earn his angel wings. When George says he wishes he'd never been born, Clarence shows George a WHAT IF scenario—how the world would have been different without him.

And different it was. George's brother Harry drowns because George was not there to save him. Later, a boatful of soldiers die during the war because Harry wasn't there to save them. The local pharmacist, Mr. Gower goes to prison for accidentally poisoning a client because George wasn't there to catch the mistake. George's wife, Mary, never marries and their four lovely children are never born. The Bailey Brothers' Building and Loan, which helped ordinary people own their own homes, goes out of business. And Bedford Falls, the friendly town where George lives, is now a mean and unforgiving place called Potterville after the ruthless Mr. Potter.

George realizes his life—with all the ups and downs—has meaning, and that if he had not been born, the world would be a different, less kind place.

As many of you know, George Bailey and his guardian angel Clarence are fictional characters in the classic holiday film, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

There's a reason this movie and its WHAT IF premise is a perennial favorite throughout the world. It speaks to the human spirit and how each one of us has an important role to play. It reminds us that our actions have long-lasting effects on those around us.

For the better part of 100 years, Soroptimist has played its important role of helping women and girls live better, more productive lives. We've known what the international development community and organizations like the Gates and Clinton foundations have recently come to realize: investing in and educating women and girls is key to solving many of the world's



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problems. When women are educated and have opportunity and choice, they lift up themselves, build healthier families, break the cycle of poverty, and improve their communities and the world. In fact, educating women is the single most effective anti-poverty intervention.

Our Live Your Dream Awards program intervenes in the life of a woman after she's broken free from the obstacles that held her back—domestic and sexual violence, poverty, homelessness, addiction. She is on a path to rebuild her life and achieve her dreams. But that path is long and fraught with challenges that often send a woman and her dependents back to their old life. The Live Your Dream Awards come at just the right time—keeping women on the path to achieve their dreams.

Our recipients are strong, passionate women who serve as positive role models to their children. And many of them use their own traumatic life experiences to inform their career choices. They create a ripple effect by going into the helping professions: social work, nursing, legal advocacy.

This past year we honored Esperanza and Terriea, both poor and victims of sex trafficking, and Sandra, a victim of sexual violence and other tragedies. Each is committed to giving back to others.

Those of you at convention saw first-hand what a determined woman Terriea is. As a young child in Canada, she was adopted away from her indigenous tribe into an emotionally and physically abusive home. She ran away and was an ideal target for pimps in the sex trade. Her desperation led her to use drugs and alcohol to numb her pain. When she began to turn her life around for herself and her children, she realized her biggest obstacle was her lack of education to get a job that would support her family. "The Live Your Dream Award means stability for me and my family," she said. "That way, no matter what this next year has in store, I will not have to put my education on hold for financial reasons."

"Now I have a purpose," she added. "I will continue to create a safe space for others to do their healing and transformational work. I will use my voice to share my story to inspire others to do the same. The Live Your Dream Awards will help me to further my growth, accountability and commitment to be a transformational agent and end this cycle for my family!"

The ripple effect was in full force as Terriea shared her plans to start her own counseling service to help other indigenous women who have suffered from trauma. "My wounds," she said, "have become my gifts to offer others."

Esperanza, who goes by an alias for safety reasons, is risking her life to rescue other women and girls from the horrors she experienced. And, she is studying to become a lawyer, so she can help them even more.

Sandra is studying to become a chef so she can provide for her children and grandson. Terriea, Esperanza and Sandra join the tens of thousands of women we've helped through

our Live Your Dream Awards, and they in turn are helping hundreds of thousands of others to lead better, safer, healthier lives:

Past recipients like Rebecca, a domestic violence survivor who teaches other women how to escape violence and live free from it.

Dawn, a survivor of sexual violence and drug addiction, studying to become a lawyer to help other survivors.

Tyra, a domestic violence survivor who opened her own center for women fleeing from abusive situations.

Miki, who overcame her own health problems to become a doctor.

Lisa, an abuse survivor now helping others in her role as a social worker.

Shirlee, who escaped from a religious cult, now counsels other women who are victims of that same cult.

Rowena, the first in her indigenous tribe to get an education so she can bring economic prosperity to her people, particularly women and girls.

As a Soroptimist, I can't help but think about the WHAT IF with all these women. What would happen to them if we weren't there to support them?

Take Terreia. The trauma and hardships she suffered are unimaginable to most of us. Physical abuse. Rape. Sex trafficking. Poverty. Addiction. Homelessness. She credits all the angels in her life—including Soroptimist—with helping her to get and stay on her path. But if any one of those angels had failed her, Terreia could very easily have found herself back living on the streets, in the clutches of a sex trafficking ring, or even dead. I shudder to think about the life she and her children might be leading if Soroptimist hadn't been there to support her.

Take a minute to think about all the Live Your Dream Award recipients you've met in your clubs, and where they might be if you hadn't been their angels. What if your club had not provided this life-changing opportunity?

It's a sobering thought. Certainly, many of those beautiful and determined women would have been knocked off their path and back into a life of hopelessness and despair if Soroptimist and our Live Your Dream Awards had not been there for them.

Our new Dream It, Be It Program is the perfect bookend for our tried and true Live Your Dream Awards. I recently read that one in three young people grow up without a positive role model or mentor in their lives. They are less likely to graduate from high school and college, and more likely to face food insecurity and homelessness. But at-risk young people who have mentors are 55 percent more likely to enroll in college and 78 percent more likely to volunteer in their communities.

Girls who lack positive role models and mentors have additional vulnerabilities. They are more likely to become teenage moms and drop out of school, victims of teen dating violence, and prey for sex traffickers—just like Terreia and Esperanza were.

Dream It, Be It is an interventional program that reaches out to disadvantaged girls to help them move on to a healthy path. Using SIA's incredible curriculum, last year our clubs helped more than 8,000 girls. We've heard such positive things from our participants:

"Dream It, Be It really helped me look at my goals long-term. It showed me that I'm going to fail sometimes and I have to learn from my mistakes," said one.

"I learned that we are all beautiful confident people and you can learn a lot about overcoming your obstacles, stresses and fears and failures, and not letting any of that define you," said another.

82% of participants felt more confident about their future success, and 84% felt more prepared to pursue their career after participating in the program. Those are impressive results!

Now, here's the thing. We estimate there are 20 million women and girls in our 20 countries and territories who need our programs. 20 million!

That's where the Big Goal you've been hearing about comes in. Because we know the need is so great in the countries and territories we serve, you—our members—have told us you want to invest in the dreams of women and girls by focusing on increasing the capacity of our Dream Programs. These programs have demonstrated their impact and ability to change lives in powerful ways.

Hold that thought and now consider this: We've been hearing our clubs want more members, greater recognition, and more outside financial resources to fund our programs.

The best thing you can do to help SIA and your own club gain more recognition is by doing what we tell the world we do. That means making our Dream Programs the center of your club's efforts. And you know what? I can tell you for a fact that our most robust clubs are those that focused on our Dream Programs. Unifying around our Dream Programs will bring greater recognition with new partners and outside funders who want to help us serve even more women and girls.

It's key to our future viability as an organization.

Clubs also tell us, "But we've been doing our breast cancer project, or our sex trafficking project, or our domestic violence project for years and we don't want to give them up." You don't have to give up working on those important issues that make up some of the biggest obstacles facing women and girls. We're just asking you to think about them a little differently.

The genius of our Dream Programs and what makes them so uniquely effective is that they

fill a void other programs don't. We hear a lot about domestic violence awareness, and saving women and girls from trafficking. But what happens then? Few resources exist to help these women and girls post-crisis. Our programs fill that gap. We give women and girls the resources to help build their confidence, resilience, and perseverance in the pursuit of their dreams. Our Dream Programs address critical issues affecting women and girls while also unifying our Soroptimist brand and impact.

The vast majority of our Live Your Dream Awardees have survived both domestic violence and poverty. Did you know that 85 percent of domestic violence survivors return to their abusers, often several times, before finally breaking free? And the number one reason is a lack of financial resources and economic opportunity. One late bill. One sick child. One broken down car. That's all it would take to send a woman spiraling backward, erasing her hard-won progress.

Did you know that poor women are significantly more likely to die of breast cancer than their better off counterparts? Poor women often lack access to health care. Women with resources don't have to make the horrible choice, as many poor women do, between treating their breast cancer or keeping the jobs that feed their families.

And, as mentioned earlier, women and girls with choice and opportunity are far less vulnerable to being caught up in the nightmarish world of sex trafficking.

So, by actively growing our life-changing Dream Programs, we are making a tangible difference in addressing the myriad obstacles that can derail a woman or girl's life. Our Dream Programs are about the path forward. Dream It, Be It puts girls on that path. Live Your Dream Awards keep women on the path they've already chosen.

Clarence, in *It's a Wonderful Life*, was still working on earning his angel's wings, but he understood the value and potential one single person can make to the world around them.

"Each man's life touches so many other lives," he said. "When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"

We need to prevent leaving an awful hole for the 20 million women and girls waiting to realize their potential and live their dreams—and the millions more they could go on to help. They need us to encourage them. Cheer them on. Lift them up when they stumble. And support them, without judgment.

We have to make sure they need never worry about the WHAT IF.

For nearly a century, Soroptimist has been on the frontlines of empowering women and girls. To remain there means recommitting to doing everything we can to remain relevant. To reconsider how we spend our time and resources to shape our organization's future and the future of the women and girls who need our help. To focus on and fund our proven Dream Programs so we are who we say we are. To embrace our Big Goal of investing in women and girls to increase our collective impact.

Will you join me, with a renewed sense of purpose and pride as we look toward the future and our next 100 years? (LOOK AT AUDIENCE AND WAIT FOR THEM TO SAY YES, ENCOURAGE THEM IF NECESSARY)

Clarence was there for George Bailey when he needed him most. We know there are 20 million women and girls who need us to be their guardian angels. Let's be sure Soroptimist, through our Dream Programs, is there for them so these deserving women and girls can live their dreams. Thank you.