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FACT SHEET: Women's Opportunity Awards

Organizational Profile

Founded in 1921, Soroptimist International of the Americas is an international volunteer service organization for business and professional women. Almost 100,000 Soroptimists in more than 120 countries and territories contribute time and financial support to community-based project benefiting women and girls.

Organizational Mission

Soroptimist's mission is to improve the lives of women and girls, in local communities and throughout the world.

Women's Opportunity Awards

The Women's Opportunity Awards program, Soroptimist's major service project, aids women seeking to improve their economic status by gaining additional skills, training and education. The program helps women who, as the primary wage earners for their families, must improve their employment status by entering or returning to the work force.

Women's Opportunity Awards applicants have faced severe hardships that have prevented them from pursuing and achieving their educational and professional goals. Most are single mothers and/or reliant on public assistance as their source of income. Many are domestic abuse survivors. The Women's Opportunity Awards helps these women rebuild their lives through improved employment opportunities.

This unique program supplies women with the resources they need to get ahead. Recipients may use the cash awards to offset any costs associated with their efforts to attain higher education, including tuition, books, supplies, childcare and car care.

Each year, more than \$800,000 is awarded through the Women's Opportunity Awards program. In 2001, The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) named Soroptimist to its honor roll for this program. In 2003, the Women's Opportunity Awards received the Award of Excellence from ASAE's Associations Advance America award program.

History

The Women's Opportunity Awards program was created in 1972 by popular vote of the Soroptimist membership. Because of their interest in "upward mobility for women," members voted overwhelmingly for the creation of an award for training or retraining that would enable women to obtain higher level jobs. In December 1997, the Soroptimist Board of Directors adopted the Women's Opportunity Awards as Soroptimist's major service project because the program best exemplifies the aims of the organization.

Program Structure

The program begins on the club level, where award amounts vary. Club-level recipients become eligible for additional awards at other levels of the organization. In addition, Soroptimist grants three \$10,000 finalist awards each year. Since the program's inception, Soroptimist has funded almost \$5.5 million in Women's Opportunity Awards and assisted about 1,640 women. In total (including local club activity), approximately \$15 million in Women's Opportunity Awards has been disbursed to about 22,500 women since the program began in 1972.

Public Awareness

Women's Opportunity Awards finalists were the focus of two *First for Women* magazine articles in 1999 and 2000. The first article told the story of Kathy Medley, a single mother of five who left an abusive marriage to make a better life for her family. With the help of the Women's Opportunity Awards and support from local Soroptimists, Medley turned her life around. She eventually earned a degree in dental hygiene and provided a financially and emotionally secure life for her children. Medley has since remarried and is a dental hygienist and the proud co-owner of a hardware store. In 2002, Soroptimist created a public service announcement (PSA) based on Medley's inspirational journey. The PSA earned an Award of Distinction in The Communicator Awards 2002 Video Competition, which recognizes excellence in the field of communications.

The second *First for Women* article introduced readers to Guadalupe Vidales, who emigrated from Mexico to the United States only to end up in a violent marriage. Vidales fled with her two children to a domestic violence shelter supported by a local Soroptimist club. Eventually she enrolled in college and with the help of the Women's Opportunity Awards earned a degree in psychology. Vidales, who organized domestic violence awareness programs at her university, went on to earn a Ph.D.

In 2002, Soroptimist and the Women's Opportunity Awards program were showcased on *Voices of Vision*, a televised documentary series on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). *Voices of Vision* featured individual stories of people who have been helped or affected by non-profit organizations. Women Helping Women: A Tradition of Service, the episode featuring Soroptimist, was beamed by satellite to PBS stations in the United States and Canada.