

Soroptimist International Strengthening Women With Skills

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Photo by: Ryan Morrill

The word soroptimist is interpreted as “best for women,” with the Latin *soror* meaning sister and *optima* meaning best. Some may recognize the word in association with the Clothes Closet, formerly called the Suit-Up Shop, a secondhand outlet for women’s professional and everyday attire and accessories, newly reopened at the Pine Street building behind the Bay Avenue Community Center in Manahawkin. But Soroptimist International of LBI is mainly known as a fundraising charity that helps girls and women reach their goals. Service projects involve such things as refurbishing a bedroom at the domestic abuse shelter Providence House, or building a float for the Ship Bottom Christmas Parade,

On a grander scale, Soroptimist International, founded in Oakland, Calif., in 1921, is a global network of business and professional women working to improve the lives of girls and women by providing resources and opportunities. The organization’s vision is for females to achieve their individual and collective potential through fundraising and advocacy work to advance aspirations and give females an equal voice in creating strong and peaceful communities. With the 100th anniversary coming up in 2021, the organization is aligning its resources at every level – “working as one” – to create a better world for women and girls.

There are nearly 1,500 clubs in 20 countries.

Long Beach Island's Soroptimist group was formed in 1956 as an outgrowth of the Philadelphia chapter. Its mission has never changed: to enable personal growth and social and economic empowerment. According to the literature, "It's women at their best, working to help other women to be their best." The core values include gender equality, empowerment, education, diversity and fellowship.

At its essence, the club members are women who want "to give back," according to Co-president Ellen Dombrowski. A retired nurse, she came from a large family containing strong women, including four sisters.

Other chapter members include retired teachers, doctors, counselors; all have different expertise and experience to share.

It's "absolutely non-political," Dombrowski added.

In 1966, the club held a design contest for a Long Beach Island flag. The contest winner was a 12-year-old boy named Jeffrey Huber – his design was the iconic blue sky and white, spread-winged sea gull logo everyone knows and recognizes today.

"The club still holds the copyright, and the flag has been an important source of income for our charitable causes since that time," Dombrowski said. Thousands are sold each year.

The LBI chapter has about 40 members from throughout Southern Ocean County, according to Dombrowski. She and Kathy Picarello took over in the fall as co-presidents. Since then, the chapter has joined the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce; sold LBI flags at Merchants Mart; attended the Soroptimist North Atlantic regional conference in October; purchased a computer and a Square credit card reader to improve record-keeping; procured a storage unit; reopened the Clothes Closet; held a strategic planning meeting; developed a curriculum for the "Dream It, Be It" program; organized a baby shower at Providence House; participated in the Gift of Warmth at St. Francis Community Center; collected gift cards for a Cape May Soroptimist sister who had suffered a house fire; supported the Girl Scouts of America and the New Lisbon Developmental Center; and had information tables at both Women's Health Night at Southern Ocean Medical Center and Stafford Township's Senior Volunteer Fair.

Soroptimist's main vehicles for change are the Dream programs, which provide access to education and skills training by way of scholarships and workshops.

The "Dream It, Be It" program is designed to help at-risk girls in middle or high school to identify career goals and a path to success. Soroptimists gather referrals from the community (St. Francis Community Center is a resource) and work with local school guidance counselors to identify students who are deserving and in need but might be overlooked.

The "Live Your Dream" award goes to a woman who is the head of her household, with dependents, having overcome obstacles such as abuse, teen pregnancy, addiction, mental or

physical health issues, and is looking to continue her education and increase the standard of living for herself and her children.

The group's major fundraiser, a wine social and auction, will be held this year on April 26 at Sea Oaks Country Club, with the theme "Nautical Nights." Tickets are \$50 apiece and will go on sale at the end of this month. Sponsors are still being sought.

Soroptimist LBI meets the second Wednesday of each month from September to June, at a different restaurant and with a different speaker each month. The February meeting will be at Calloways on Feb. 13 at 6 p.m.; the cost to attend is \$25.

For information about how to get involved, visit the Soroptimist International of LBI Facebook page or call Dombrowski at 610-858-1046 or Picarello at 201-953-3073.

— **Victoria Ford**

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