THOUGH THEY COULDN’T BE MEMBERS UNTIL 1987, WOMEN HAVE MADE THEIR MARK ON OUR HISTORY

Story researched by Eileen Dennie

The face of Kiwanis International changed forever in the summer of 1987 when delegates at the 72nd annual convention voted to allow women to join the organization. Lagging behind its student programs, Circle K International and Key Club International—which had female members since 1973 and 1977, respectively—Kiwanis finally had the chance to invite wives, mothers, sisters, granddaughters, nieces and daughters to serve the children of the world as official “members.”

It was a historic vote. And it changed everything.

Now, as we celebrate 25 years of women in Kiwanis, we look back at how we got where we are, who we met along the way and how these and countless other women shifted this organization’s course and left a legacy of giving.

THE EARLY YEARS

While the amendment to allow women into the organization as official members would come up—and fail—year after year, that didn’t stop women from taking on numerous roles.

Phyllis Sawyer was a fixture at Kiwanis club meetings in Barstow, California, for 58 years, starting in 1953 when the 24-year-old was invited to her first meeting. But she wasn’t a member. She played piano during meetings. She was the only woman to regularly at-
We have benefited greatly by this very significant change internationally, nationally and locally. Women have added a welcome point of view to our clubs. They have become leaders and very willing workers in our many public service activities and programs.

Olympia, Washington, Kiwanis Club member
Don Ernst, May 2006

Women in Kiwanis

FACING CHALLENGES

It was May 1921. Leah Slaughter had just been given honorary membership by the Kiwanis Club of Goldsboro, North Carolina, because she had “so successfully assisted with its musical and social programs.” According to the Goldsboro News-Artist, Slaughter was “the only lady Kiwanian in Goldsboro.”

There was only one small problem. Slaughter was a woman.

Clearly, Slaughter and the Goldsboro Kiwanis members were ahead of the times. But membership was open only to males, so Slaughter technically was not a Kiwanian—no matter what the newspapers wrote.

Members of the Las Vegas Strip Kiwanis Club say that in 1976, club President Neil Slocum, who was known for championing women’s rights, submitted an application for a member named “Shelly,” who supposedly was a friend of Slocum’s. Nobody ever met her, but club members to this day like the idea that they had a female member before the historic vote.

And they weren’t alone. Many clubs were bending the rules or finding ways around disclosing the new members’ gender. Frank Persinger, the club secretary for the Kiwanis Club of Clinton Forge, Virginia, used such a tactic sometime prior to 1987 when club pia-
nast Millie Hardy asked if she could join. For years afterwards, she received mail from Kiwanis International addressed to Mr. M. Hardy, but Frank never disclosed to her exactly why. Hardy served as a Kiwanian for more than 22 years—becoming a life member—before her death in 2009.

Before women were full-fledged members, many wives took active roles supporting their fathers, grandfathers and husbands in a variety of ways, many serving side-by-side with the men.

Kiwanis International saw and heard of the interest women had in joining. As a compromise to allowing women to join Kiwanis clubs, a separate club option was created in the mid-1980s: Kiwanianne clubs. Any Kiwanis club could sponsor and charter a Kiwanianne club, inviting community businesswomen and especially wives and widows of Kiwanians to join. Within the

LEAH SLAUGHTER
On May 6, 1921, Leah Slaughter was given honorary membership by the Kiwanis Club of Goldsboro, North Carolina, prompting Kiwanis magazine to suggest that it is “inadvisable” to give honorary membership to women “for obvious reasons.”
THE 1987 KIWANIS INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION VOTE

On Tuesday morning, July 7, 1987, during the House of Delegates session, Amendment 2 was introduced by Kiwanis International Trustee Wil Blechman: “Gentlemen, the purpose of Amendment Number 2 is to permit women to become members of Kiwanis.” With 14 clubs sponsoring this amendment, including his own Kiwanis Club of Olympia, Washington, Rex Derr moved for its adoption. An amendment to that amendment was then introduced, changing the wording of the amendment to include all countries, not just the United States, in offering membership to women. The amendment to Amendment 2 passed: 2,855 for and 2,406 against, making the women’s amendment uniform throughout Kiwanis countries, and debate on the issue resumed. After more points of order and debate, Amendment 2 passed by a 2/3 majority taken by standing vote.

first year, 50 clubs were chartered and more than 1,500 women became members.

For many, the Kiwanianne clubs were a good compromise: Women served their communities and their projects were supported by Kiwanis resources, including insurance. And men “got to keep their sanctuary,” according to Susan Williams, a Kiwanianne member in Molalla, Oregon. “Women did their thing, while men did theirs.” Susan’s husband, Charlie, was an active member of the Kiwanis Club of Molalla, Oregon, and Susan served right alongside him for years.

Kiwanianne clubs popped up all over, and soon women were getting their hands dirty with service on a larger scale. On April 18, 1984, 66 women from Glendora, California, became charter members of the Glendora Kiwanianne Club. Sponsored by the local Kiwanis club, both groups served the community of 50,000 people for more than a decade, with Kiwanianne remaining as a women-only group even beyond the 1987 vote. With the elimination of Kiwanianne charters in September 1996, this Kiwanianne club became a full-fledged Kiwanis
Kiwanis

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS

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We have wisely changed Kiwanis to meet the demands of an international organization in the closing decades of the 20th century.”

— Then-president-designate Anton J. “Tony” Kaiser, in his closing address of the 1987 convention.

A proposed amendment to allow women to join Kiwanis won 33 percent of the vote at the Minneapolis convention—once again defeated but gaining momentum.

The United Nations declared ’75 “International Women’s Year.”

April 1977

The New York Court of Appeals decided that Kiwanis fell within the private club exception, allowing the organization to keep its male-only membership.

1975

Key Club International opened membership to female students everywhere.

1977

Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize. Later, in 1996, she’d receive Kiwanis’ World Service Medal.

1979

Kiwanis International moved its headquarters to Indianapolis, Indiana.

1981

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1982

But joining Kiwanianne clubs wasn’t an option for everyone. With membership in Circle K and Key Club already open, Kiwanis was behind its student groups. And that was about to take a turn.

CHANGING HISTORY

The subject of opening Kiwanis membership to women was brought up in spirited debates in front of the House of Delegates at each international convention for over a decade, starting in 1973. Each year the amendment gathered more momentum, but the board of trustees was not supportive of this effort until 1986 when the writing was on the wall—or at least in the court documents.

In the years leading up to the vote to allow women to join, four state courts and four federal courts ruled against Kiwanis, Rotary and Lions. Court costs were adding up. After carefully considering the unfavorable judicial record in similar cases, the Kiwanis board decided to take a stance and issued its own amendment. There was a lot of debate.

Many men felt women shouldn’t join because they could have their own separate organization. Some felt that having women would bring too much change.

One member said: “My primary reason for opposing this amendment is that its passage will change the character of our organization. The atmosphere of our club meetings will change. Some of our traditions and ceremonies will change. We can argue whether or not these changes will be good or bad, but there can be no argument that the admission of women will change Kiwanis.”

Others had more positive thoughts about the possible changes women could bring.

“I am distressed to know that our spouses, which support us in so many ways, must remain second-class persons, doing much of the work while not being able to have the opportunity of the distinction of being a full-time Kiwanis member.”

In the 1980s, amidst all the debate, many clubs began to defy Kiwanis International Bylaws by bringing women into their membership. By 1986, an estimated 40 clubs had asked women to join. Some clubs’ charter were revoked because of this decision.

Stephanie Pearlman Pangaro

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The New York Court of Appeals decided that Kiwanis fell within the “private club” exception to discrimination claims, allowing the organization to keep its male-only membership.
was acknowledged as an “associate” active member by her club, the Passaic, New Jersey, Kiwanis Club, in October 1984, and when the vote passed in 1987, Pangaro was already serving as the club’s vice president. She remains an active member of the Randolph Kiwanis Club in New Jersey.

The Iowa City, Iowa, Kiwanis Club added newspaper editor Marlene Perrin and librarian Lollie Eggers to its roster. “At first we got congratulation letters from Kiwanis International, welcoming us to Kiwanis,” recalls Perrin, “but then two or three weeks later, we received a letter saying they don’t take women.”

Despite the organization’s stance, the club felt a pretty strong commitment to keep Perrin and Eggers on board. By the time the 1987 decision was made, the women already were involved with several club projects and fundraisers.

By the 1985 Kiwanis International convention, things were really heating up. The Mankato, Minnesota, club proposed an amendment that would allow clubs the option of receiving women into full Kiwanis membership. Men spoke about concerns that the atmosphere of their meetings would change, while others were disheartened that their club couldn’t invite the local university president or bank managers—women—to join. The amendment failed: 1,145 to 3,164.

At the 1986 Kiwanis International convention, debate continued with many speakers citing the expense other service organizations had incurred fighting legal battles about this issue, others imploring delegates to vote down the amendment and uphold the club’s freedom to choose its own members. In the end, 62.3 percent voted for the amendment, just short of the 66 2/3 percent needed for it to pass. (Watch a related video at www.KiwanisOne.org/women.)

Then, at the 1987 convention in Washington, D.C., 14 clubs sponsored Amendment 2 to allow women into membership. The amendment was amended, debated and faced several points of order. It then passed by a 2/3 majority taken by standing vote.

Women were in.

The impact of the decision was felt immediately with a membership increase of more than 3,000 women in Kiwanis clubs in the first six months. The trend was obvious: More than twice that number were members by the 1988 convention.
and thousands more joined during the 1988–89 administrative year.

“We have benefited greatly by this very significant change internationally, nationally and locally,” Olympia Club member Don Ernst said in May 2006. “We have added a welcome point of view to our clubs.”

LEADING THE WAY

So many women joined right away, each with her own story. Among the women who joined that first week, for example, was Cindy Champer, who was inducted into the Ashland, Kentucky, Breakfast Kiwanis Club on July 14, 1987, and became the club’s first female president and the division’s first female lieutenant governor. Barbara Saalfeld joined the Granada Hills, California, Kiwanis Club on July 7, 1987. She has been a member of several Kiwanis clubs in Washington state, serving as secretary, president and the division’s first female lieutenant governor.

Read more about this important time in Kiwanis history at www.KiwanisOne.org/women, where you’ll also meet some of the first “women of Kiwanis.”

JULIE FLETCHER

Julie Fletcher joined the Ridgewood, New Jersey, Kiwanis Club in June 1984. Her dues and fees were returned, but Fletcher and the Ridgewood Kiwanians did not relent, filing a discrimination suit against Kiwanis in August. Within a month, Kiwanis filed a trademark infringement suit to prevent the club from using the Kiwanis name. U.S. District Judge H. Lee Sarokin supported the Ridgewood club’s position in February 1986, calling the prohibition of women members “harmful” and basically illegal, at least in the state of New Jersey. Fletcher (below) was in attendance in Washington, DC, when the historic vote was taken to accept women into Kiwanis. The organization will celebrate the 25th anniversary of that decision when members from around the world gather in New Orleans for the 97th annual convention, June 28–July 1.

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