



## KIWANIS BECOMES A COED ORGANIZATION

On July 7, 1987, delegates at the annual Kiwanis International convention in Washington, DC, heard the declaration: "The chair rules that it (Amendment Number 2 as amended) has passed by two-thirds vote."

At that moment, the very nature of Kiwanis club membership was forever changed: within the provisions of the International Constitution and Bylaws, Kiwanis clubs worldwide could elect women to membership. The representatives of the clubs assembled as a delegate body had spoken. The Albuquerque, New Mexico Tribune proclaimed in a headline: "Kiwaniis Clubs Go Co-ed."

There was a significant purpose in having the delegates adopt the amendment admitting women into membership "as amended" on the floor of the House of Delegates. The original amendment would have required clubs only in the United States to open their membership to any person meeting all other requirements regardless of gender. It was Past International President William M. Eagles who made an impassioned plea to have the provision to the Constitution, if passed, apply to clubs worldwide. His amendment to Amendment Number 2 would apply the same standards of membership to all Kiwanis clubs throughout the organization by retaining club control over the composition of its membership. A new distinctly different era for Kiwanis had begun.

When the first Kiwanis club in Detroit, Michigan, was chartered by the State of Michigan on January 21, 1915, there really was no question about the gender of membership. Kiwanis clubs traditionally were male. In 1921, however, some three years before the final adoption of the current Constitution and Bylaws in Denver

in 1924, it seemed appropriate to spell out more specifically the requirements for membership in a local club. At that time, the provisions for male membership only were inserted into the Constitution and Bylaws and, therefore, the Standard Form for Club Bylaws also contained this restriction.

Beginning in the 1970s, almost every International convention had an amendment presented with the continuing arguments for and against—but with some growing support evident for—the admission of women. One attempt tried to "get a foot in the door" by proposing honorary membership for women. That was in 1976 at the San Diego convention when President Ted R. Osborn presided over the House of Delegates.

The first clubs to knowingly admit women appeared on the horizon. The Kiwanis Club of Great Neck, New York, took such action, as did the Kiwanis Club of Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado Springs, Colorado. There was, of course, no question as to what action was mandated. The Constitution and Bylaws gave no choice. Each club was notified that it had sixty days to comply with the provisions governing membership or its charter would be revoked. The Board also continued to monitor the membership records, and when clubs had admitted women to membership, action dictated by the Constitution and Bylaws was taken immediately. In most instances, clubs agreed to comply rather than to have their charters revoked. There was, however, no actual way of knowing how many female members simply became unofficial in character and were never reported to the International organization. On several occasions, lieutenant governors reported violations, and such cases, of course, were followed up.

At the International level, amendments continued to be presented, and there was some evidence of growing support for such a change in the Constitution and Bylaws, but never did a vote on any one amendment approach the necessary two-thirds vote required for the passage of a constitutional amendment.

In August of 1985, an attorney, Marcia Baer, supplied by the American Civil Liberties Union, was given the task of bringing a lawsuit against Kiwanis. Baer, via a television broadcast, stated that she was empowered by the Kiwanis Club of Ridgewood, New Jersey, to bring suit against Kiwanis International to strike down the Bylaws provisions of Kiwanis that made Kiwanis an organization for men only. Rather than waiting to be sued as had been announced by the club through its attorney, the Kiwanis International Board authorized its attorneys to file in federal court in New Jersey a separate federal lawsuit asking the court to stop the Ridgewood Kiwanis club from calling itself a Kiwanis club since it no longer met the criteria of one. This suit was filed on September 3, 1985, and it further asked the court to declare that Kiwanis International has the right to control the use of its name and registered service marks and, therefore, restrict the Ridgewood club

from using these after the deadline of September 25, which had been set previously by the Board. Not soon after Kiwanis' troubles, Rotary was experiencing the same issues among its organization.

Along the way of litigation, there had been considerable cost—not only in actual money expended, but even more so in anguish, anxiety, and hostility. By the time of the Washington, DC convention, more than 50 clubs had openly admitted women members. With the positive action of the delegate body on July 7, 1987, the membership resolved its own problem, allowing the Board as well as the Kiwanis Club of Ridgewood, New Jersey, to withdraw all legal action. Kiwanis clubs could confirm all women who at one time had been admitted illegally to membership to assume their full and legal role as members of clubs dedicated to serving community needs.

The impact of the Washington, DC, 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 next International convention in 1988, and thousands more joined Kiwanis' ranks during the 1988-89 administrative year. The numbers are on the rise each year.

Source: *Dimensions of Service, The Kiwanis Story*  
by L.A. "Larry" Hapgood.