ENTERPISE-RECORD

OPINION COMMENTARY

Thanks, and giving: Soroptimists serve helpings of both | North State Voices

By **BONNIE CHAPMAN** |
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I can say with absolute certainty that I never imagined when I joined Soroptimist International of Chico (SI Chico), that I would end up in a traditional Japanese bathhouse with four other members, in our birthday suits. We were in the ancient capital of Kyoto, staying at a Japanese style hotel called a ryokan, known for having excellent bathhouses. We had arrived in Japan four days before the start of our international convention to sightsee and experience the culture. Our plans included a full day of touring Kyoto's magnificent temples and shrines, a visit to a hedgehog café (yep, that is a thing in Japan), authentic Japanese food, a day with our sister club, Soroptimist International of Nara, and the unique opportunity to experience an onsen (a Japanese style bath).

The Japanese take bathing seriously. It is considered to be an important, meditative Zen-like experience in sharp contrast to daily life. Wearing only our Yukatas, (thin, kimono-like robes, worn indoors) we entered the bathing area. Swimsuits are not allowed, and the only acceptable shoes worn to and from the bath are indoor slippers (not to be confused with the bathroom slippers worn only while in the toilet area). Stripped down and inside the onsen, each of us claimed a washing station where you are expected to scrub head to toe before enjoying the various pools. Most onsen's have several pools of different temperatures ranging from scalding to ice cold along with steam and sauna rooms. We partook of it all, and emerged relaxed, wrapped in our Yukata, clean as a whistle, with skin flush and souls refreshed. We were totally bonded by this unique experience and by our entire visit to Japan.

I joined SI Chico in 2013, as our home nest began to empty. I had spent 13 years as our daughter's Girl Scout troop leader and was looking to fill that void with a new volunteer organization. My friend Gayle invited me to check out her Soroptimist club and I was immediately at home. The organization will celebrate 100 years since being founded in 1921 in Oakland by a group of forward-thinking, service-minded, strong women. It has grown exponentially to include clubs in 121 countries worldwide and over 70,000 members. With its mission of improving the lives of women and girls locally and globally, the organization is one of very few non-profits to maintain a seat at the United Nations.

The Chico club will mark 91 years of service in our community in January. Emma Wilson (Emma Wilson Elementary School) was our first president and other locally well-known women such as Hester Patrick (Patrick Ranch), Alice Richardson (Richardson Springs) and Dorothy Enloe (Enloe Hospital) served as early leaders. The many substantial contributions to Chico made by SI Chico include establishing our local blood bank, The Chico Museum, The Work Training Center and a myriad of awards and scholarships which provide opportunities to local girls and women annually.

I had the profound experience of serving as the President of SI Chico during the 2018-19 year which coincided with the Camp Fire. The 80-plus members of our club, including several who lost their homes in the fire, rose to the occasion by helping in every way possible. We distributed meals prepared by our member Chef Ann Leon and helped create a database of people offering housing. We distributed new clothing sent to us by a Soroptimist in San Diego and collected donations of gift cards and cash from clubs all over the world. I spent hours those first days after the fire, answering emails and phone calls from Soroptimist clubs from Arizona to Arkansas to Australia, reaching out to help. Reading the messages and ultimately receiving support in excess of $100,000 that we could funnel into our community was gratifying beyond description, and truly humbling. Though tremendously difficult, the opportunity to serve during this period is something I am most proud of as a Soroptimist.

Each year we raise funds that we use to support awards and to give grants to other local non-profits. In a pandemic pivot, this year, Chef Leon will be producing three seasonal at home culinary kits called Bistro Bags that will include the link to an at-home YouTube cooking lesson (bistrobag.org). The club also contributes hands-on service at several locations in our community including The Jesus Center, The Chico Science Fair, Girls on the Run 5K, and more. And of course, we socialize. I am forever thankful for the wonderful friendships I have made among this group of kind, altruistic, and fun Soropti-sisters.

Life is full of opportunities. Soroptimist has provided many to the women and girls of Chico, myself included. I’ve had the opportunity to serve, learn, grow as a leader, travel to conferences near and far, and be part of an outstanding global organization that is making lasting impact. I’ve even the opportunity to take one of the best baths of my life, thanks to Soroptimist.