

MEET YOUR NEIGHBOURS

Sheila Needham-Think locally, act globally

By Matthew McCully
Special to The Record
SOUTH BOLTON

It may surprise you to discover that the voice representing Canadian women on the board of an international organization supporting women across the globe, lives in South Bolton.

Sheila Needham is the Canada Area President of the Associated Country Women of the World, elected in October at a meeting in India.

"It just worked out that way," Needham said, describing her involvement with the association.

"You get so involved, you just keep moving forward," she said.

The ACWW, the largest international organization for rural and urban women, has 460 member societies active in over 70 countries.

Needham's involvement began 42 years ago, through the affiliated Women's Institute.

"My mother-in-law brought me to a meeting when I was first married," she said. "I think that's how most women get involved; a mother, a friend, an aunt, someone invites you to a

meeting."

Over the years, Needham has climbed the ranks of the WI, serving as president of her local chapter, and then for her county, and then the province, and then the country.

At one of the early WI meetings she attended, Needham remembered one of the speakers, a local woman, who had recently traveled abroad. "I got hooked on the international aspect," she said, explaining her passion for travel.

As soon as her children were old enough, Needham began attending ACWW meetings. Her first trip was to Holland in 1992.

"I haven't missed one since," she said, listing New Zealand, South Africa, Finland and India as just a few of the places she has travelled for the triennial meetings.

So what does the ACWW do? "It's almost too big to get your head around," Needham said.

The scope of the organization is mammoth, but it is safe to say through the work of the member societies, the ACWW has had a hand in improving the lives of women from all

walks of life, and by extension, society as a whole.

Endeavours include building hospitals, lobbying for access to fresh water, or funding projects to educate and empower women.

Needham mentioned two projects the organization is currently working on, both in India, to help women start businesses and generate income.

One is in fish processing, teaching women to dry and salt fish so it will be available out of season. The other is helping with businesses making candles and pickles.

"We're not good at tooting our own horn," Needham said, explaining that the ACWW is hard at work, but often behind the scenes.

During her mandate, Needham will visit member societies across Canada to explain the different projects underway with the ACWW, and also hear the concerns of Canadian women, and bring those concerns back to the international board.

At meetings, Needham will sit elbow-to-elbow with women representing the other eight areas into which the ACWW is

divided globally. Each area includes women with unique needs, Needham said.

Needham described visiting an orphanage in India during her ACWW travels.

"They had nothing, but they treated us like royalty," she said. "They welcomed us with drums and incense and flowers. We arrived empty-handed. It was almost heart-breaking," Needham said, explaining that she appreciated seeing first-hand where ACWW funding would go and how it would help communities.

"I have so much more to learn," Needham said, describing her new position with the ACWW as a surprise, a challenge and a pleasure.

"We connect with each other because we care about our communities."

The rights and needs of women vary dramatically from country to country, but at the root there are concerns shared by women in South Bolton and in Delhi, Needham assured. Things like child care, employment and clean water are universal concerns.

Violence against women is another main issue, Needham said, adding that politicians have let it slide under the table for too long.

"You don't know what you

are going to be faced with," Needham said, describing the reality of the injustice faced by women in some parts of the world.

On another trip years ago, Needham and her husband were on a tour in South Africa with other ACWW members. During a stop, some members of the delegation were required to stay on the bus.

The guides explained that there were guard dogs in the area trained to attack black women, a surreal revelation for Needham.

While it may seem unusual that a local woman is involved with the ACWW at the international level, it should be remembered that the Women's Institute began, and remains, a grassroots rural organization - one that had its start with a group of farm wives in the then-rural community of Stoney Creek, Ontario, and spread quickly to communities throughout Quebec, including the Eastern Townships.

Needham is available regionally to speak to groups wishing to learn more about the ACWW. She can be reached at Sheila.needham@sympatico.ca

You can visit www.acww.org.uk to learn more about the organization, or make a donation online.



MATTHEW MCCULLY

Sheila Needham has just taken over as the Canada Area President of the Associated Country Women of the World



Dear Santa,

We know how busy you are so The Record, along with the Lennoxville and District Women's Centre, want to help you take care of some families in our community.

The LDWC will forward information about some special children on your list to us and the very generous elves in our community will help fill their orders for delivery at Christmas.

If you would like to be an elf in Santa's Helper project, contact Sharon McCully, Publisher at The Record, by email at outletjournal@sympatico.ca or call her at 819-679-8823 and she will provide a description and wish list from one of the children, or tell you how to help.

We need many elves, so please act quickly.