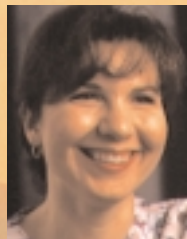
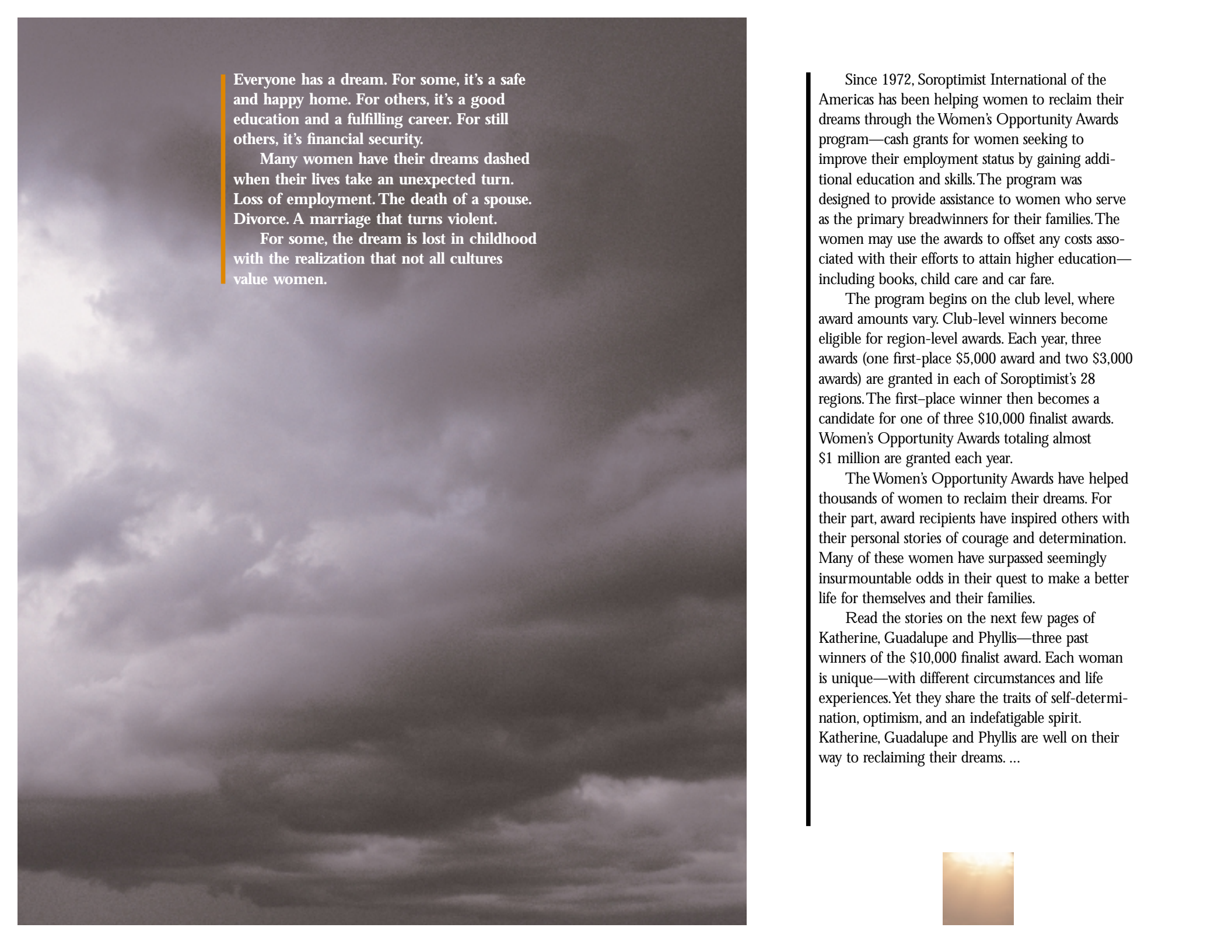


Women's Opportunity Awards

A PROGRAM OF SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF THE AMERICAS



*"Reclaiming
the Dream"*



Everyone has a dream. For some, it's a safe and happy home. For others, it's a good education and a fulfilling career. For still others, it's financial security.

Many women have their dreams dashed when their lives take an unexpected turn. Loss of employment. The death of a spouse. Divorce. A marriage that turns violent.

For some, the dream is lost in childhood with the realization that not all cultures value women.

Since 1972, Soroptimist International of the Americas has been helping women to reclaim their dreams through the Women's Opportunity Awards program—cash grants for women seeking to improve their employment status by gaining additional education and skills. The program was designed to provide assistance to women who serve as the primary breadwinners for their families. The women may use the awards to offset any costs associated with their efforts to attain higher education—including books, child care and car fare.

The program begins on the club level, where award amounts vary. Club-level winners become eligible for region-level awards. Each year, three awards (one first-place \$5,000 award and two \$3,000 awards) are granted in each of Soroptimist's 28 regions. The first-place winner then becomes a candidate for one of three \$10,000 finalist awards. Women's Opportunity Awards totaling almost \$1 million are granted each year.

The Women's Opportunity Awards have helped thousands of women to reclaim their dreams. For their part, award recipients have inspired others with their personal stories of courage and determination. Many of these women have surpassed seemingly insurmountable odds in their quest to make a better life for themselves and their families.

Read the stories on the next few pages of Katherine, Guadalupe and Phyllis—three past winners of the \$10,000 finalist award. Each woman is unique—with different circumstances and life experiences. Yet they share the traits of self-determination, optimism, and an indefatigable spirit. Katherine, Guadalupe and Phyllis are well on their way to reclaiming their dreams. ...



“At last, my life—
and the lives that my children will have—
has hope and direction.”

Katherine

In the early 1980s, Katherine was a 16-year-old high school drop-out with a new marriage and a new baby. She gave birth to four more children in a marriage that slowly disintegrated into a nightmare of mental abuse and alcoholism. Katherine made the decision to leave the marriage because she knew “my children would never have anything as long as we remained in that situation.”

After leaving her husband, Katherine provided a nice home for her children on very little income. Meanwhile, she dreamed of returning to school to earn a degree in dental hygiene.

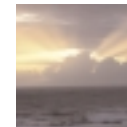
Determined to turn her life around, Katherine enrolled in a state university while she and her family survived on public assistance. She used the money from the Women’s Opportunity Awards toward her transportation costs—which included maintenance on a series of used cars.

Shortly after Katherine began her studies, her ex-husband died of a drug and alcohol overdose—throwing Katherine and her family into an emotional turmoil. Despite this setback, Katherine continued on her journey.

“I believe everything happens for a reason, and for me that reason must have been to make me strong enough to withstand any storm.”

With the help of the Women’s Opportunity Awards, Katherine completed her degree—despite having to drive two hours each way to and from the dental school. Today, she works as a dental hygienist, making more in four days than she used to earn in a month. And, she is happily remarried and raising a blended family with her husband.

“I’m enjoying life to its fullest.”





"I have made a commitment to use my entire potential to succeed, and to live each minute as if it were my last."

Guadalupe

Growing up in Mexico, Guadalupe dreamed of immigrating to the United States, where her grandfather had gone to start a new life. Shortly after Guadalupe arrived in the United States, her grandfather died, and she found herself married to a man she had met in her English language classes.

After giving birth to two children, Guadalupe slowly came to realize that she was trapped in a violent marriage. She felt lost and alone, without family in a country that was not her own.

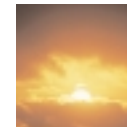
"Imagine that your husband has taken complete control of your life. He calls you names and criticizes everything you do, and sometimes he uses physical abuse. Even your hair is not your own when he takes a pair of scissors and cuts it off.

"Suddenly your entire dream comes apart. You feel trapped as if in a dark room with no windows and no door to escape."

Eventually, Guadalupe found the strength to leave her abusive marriage with the help of a domestic violence shelter supported by the local Soroptimist club. Guadalupe quickly improved her English skills and earned a certificate in domestic violence counseling.

Aided in great part by the Women's Opportunity Awards, Guadalupe has since completed an undergraduate degree. She remains an active volunteer in efforts to prevent and eliminate domestic violence.

"I am very grateful to the Soroptimists because they have helped me since the beginning of my new life."





"I'm strong now.
I'm not a victim anymore."

Phyllis

Several years ago, Phyllis made the decision to stop a self-destructive pattern of drug and alcohol abuse.

"For over 18 years, I had abused my mind, body and soul to a point where the drugs could no longer cover the shame I sought to avoid."

Phyllis' past was one filled with sexual and physical abuse, betrayal and broken dreams. A first marriage to an abusive spouse left Phyllis struggling to hold on to her three children. Ultimately she lost custody of them because of her drug and alcohol activities. She entered into another relationship, which ended before the birth of her youngest child.

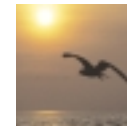
Phyllis says that when she "made the decision to change my life, it was because somewhere deep inside I knew that I was worth fighting for."

Enrolling in community college, Phyllis used the Women's Opportunity Awards for child care and transportation costs.

Today, Phyllis is sober. She holds an associate's degree in administration of justice. She has regained custody of her three oldest children. She is employed as a program associate with a local social services agency—at an annual salary that would have taken her seven years to collect on public assistance. She is working toward a bachelor's degree in sociology. And, despite her busy schedule, Phyllis also makes time to volunteer in her community.

Armed with her own courage and resolve, and with the help of the Women's Opportunity Awards, Phyllis is a self-described phoenix who has risen from the ashes.

"And how I have soared!"



About Soroptimist

Founded in 1921, Soroptimist is a volunteer service organization for women in business, management and the professions. Soroptimist International, of which Soroptimist International of the Americas is a part, has almost 100,000 members in about 120 countries and territories who contribute time and financial support to community-based projects benefiting women.

Soroptimists are women of all ages, professions and ethnic groups—joined by their desire to improve the quality of life in their communities.

In addition to participation in the Women's Opportunity Awards program, other Soroptimist International of the Americas' club projects include: creating awareness about domestic violence, providing literacy instruction, mentoring girls and young women, and campaigning in the fight against breast cancer.

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About Soroptimist Programs

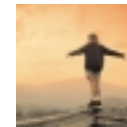
Soroptimist International of the Americas provides funds to initiate and support programs that directly address current societal needs.

In addition to the Women's Opportunity Awards program, Soroptimist funds three other programs that underscore its mission of "making a difference for women":

- **Making a Difference for Women Grants**—These grants are awarded annually to Soroptimist clubs initiating or continuing community projects benefiting women and girls. Sample grant projects include: refurbishing domestic violence shelters; providing mammograms to women with no health insurance; and sponsoring enrichment programs for at-risk girls.

- **Prevention of Domestic Violence Initiatives**—These projects prevent and eliminate domestic violence. One initiative funded production of a domestic violence information booklet in collaboration with a well-known domestic violence prevention organization. Another project is the annual Soroptimist Workplace Campaign to End Domestic Violence, which targets domestic abuse as a workplace concern.

- **Violet Richardson Award**—Named after the first Soroptimist club president, this awards program honors young women who make the community and world a better place through volunteer action. Cash grants are given to award recipients and the organizations for which they volunteer.



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local club information:

