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BLOGGING CONNECTS WOMEN ACROSS THE WORLD



October 21, 2008, Washington, DC: The Zonta Women's Club of Washington and The Advocacy Project (AP) have launched a blog group to connect professional women in the Washington area with young American women who are volunteering with peace groups in the Balkans, Africa and the Middle East.

This innovative use of information technology was developed during the summer, when eight Zonta members in Washington decided to follow the blogs of graduate students who were serving as AP Peace Fellows in Serbia, Uganda, Jordan, El Salvador, Nepal and Kenya.

The experiment proved so successful that it recently won a prestigious advocacy award from Zonta's regional organization. AP and the Washington branch of Zonta are now exploring ways to expand the model. This could include joint projects between the two organizations to support women advocates abroad.

With 33,000 professional members working to advance the rights of women, the Zonta movement has impressive global reach. Zonta International has raised more than \$8 million for international service projects in 34 countries. The Washington branch of Zonta has shown a particular interest in AP's work, and has purchased a carpet made by AP's partner in Bosnia.

This has now evolved into a more organized initiative to connect Zonta members in Washington with Peace Fellows. This summer, a group of Zonta members met up with the six Fellows before they left and then sent them regular feedback on their blogs while they were abroad.

The result has been an unexpected boost for AP's fellowship program, which seeks to empower young professionals. This year, AP deployed 34 Fellows to 25 countries and attracted over 400 applicants – a 60-fold increase over 2003 when the program began. Most Peace Fellows have been women.

AP's fellowship program fits with Zonta's own mission, which is to advance the status of women worldwide through service and advocacy. Since 2001, the Washington branch of Zonta has awarded more than \$250,000 in scholarships to women at universities in the Washington area.

Several Zonta members described the connection with Peace Fellows as inspiring. Heather Dolstra, a travel agent in Washington, followed the blogs of Krystal Sirman, from George Washington University, who volunteered with landmine survivors in Jordan. "She wrote beautifully," said Ms Dolstra. This is a fantastic program. I am in awe of what these young people are doing out there."

Joanne Gallos, a Zonta member who works at the Inter-American Development Bank, recruited a group of friends to follow the blogs of Janet Rabin from Georgetown University. Ms Rabin worked with the Women in Black in Belgrade, and received at least one email from Washington every other day.

Ms Gallos said that Ms. Rabin's blogs had brought alive the challenges that face women in post-war Serbia and allowed her group to see the impact of conflict in the Balkans through the eyes of Serbian women. In the process, she said, the Zonta women formed a connection with the Women in Black without actually meeting them.

"Their movement to advance women, and in doing so, to help the world, is what we as Zontians also believe," Ms Gallos said. "Janet brought their tragedy, their strengths, their camaraderie, and their support of women worldwide to us... We applaud them and we weep with them."

Peace Fellows who participated in the initiative took comfort from the fact that their work was being closely followed on the other side of the world. Juliet Hutchings, from American University, worked with pygmies in Uganda under the watchful eye of Mary Ellen Bittner, a judge in Washington.

"Right out of the box, she responded," said Ms Hutchings. "She always had something really comforting to say, just a reminder that there's somebody out there that cares."

Ms. Bittner, who is a past president of Zonta International, said that the blog group had created bonds between different generations of professional women. "I had no idea about enslavement of pygmies," she said about Ms Hutchings's fellowship. "I found myself getting infected by someone else's enthusiasm. It kind of gives you a little hope."

- Read the 2008 [blogs](#) of AP Peace Fellows Janet Rabin (Serbia), Juliet Hutchings (Uganda), Kristina Rosinsky (Kenya), Krystal Sirman (Jordan), Larissa Hotra (El Salvador), and Nicole Slezak (Kosovo).

- Learn more about the [Zonta Club of Washington, DC](#)