

THE ELEANOR AND ANNA ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

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Description: In this segment, ER interviews Helen Kennedy Stevens, Service Director of the Iran Foundation.

Participants: ER, Helen Kennedy Stevens

[ER:] Thank you, Anna. Our guest today is a representative of the Soroptimist Club, Helen Kennedy Stevens, who is the past president of the New York club. In her work-a-day job, Miss Stevens has the interesting post of service director of the Iran Foundation, an agency set up by an Iranian citizen to promote health and education in his country. During World War II, Miss Stevens served for eight years as executive director of the American Bureau for Medical Aid to China. And now, won't you tell us about the Soroptimist Club? What does the name mean? What does the club do? And who is eligible to belong to it?

[Helen Stevens:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt. I'd love to tell you. The Soroptimist Clubs are classified service clubs for women. The name is really a coined word meaning "best for women." These Soroptimist Clubs were setup twenty-seven years ago by the same man who set up the Rotary Club, and the Soroptimist Clubs are set up on the same basis. That is, one member from each profession or classification. The women, in general, are either the owners of their own business or the chief executive or have achieved some position as tops in their professional field. The New York Club is a member of the American Federation of Soroptimist Clubs, which in turn is a member of the International Federation.

[ER:] I understand you're doing particularly good work in the international field and I like very much what you call your campaign, Adventures in Friendship. I'm sure we would like to hear more about that. (1:49)

[Helen Stevens:] Indeed, Mrs. Roosevelt, I'll be happy to tell you about it. Soroptimists, as one of their national service projects, have supported a training school for nurses way up in the northwest of China, in the city of Lanzhou which is in Gansu Province. It's over towards the borders of Chinese Turkistan. In that same general direction is Tibet. When I went to China in 1946 to make a study of hospitals, training schools, and medical schools which were receiving aid from America, one of my really great adventures was a trip by air across a large part of China, over the mountains to Lanzhou. The little Chinese nurses improvised up there in a way that would make us all ashamed. A pair of clean sheets in that little hospital, about two hundred feet above the river bank, represented infinite human labor, but there were clean sheets. While I was in Peking, I also met members of the Soroptimist Club of Peking which had been very active before the Japanese invasion. And then, last summer, in order to recover from flying 50,000 miles back and forth across the Pacific and over a large part of China, I boarded a slow cargo ship and went down along the East Coast of South America to Buenos Aires. And in Rio, I received a message that the Soroptimist Club of Rio wanted to have a party for me. It's a young club, the first of our clubs in South America, and here I found social workers, artists, and also Brazil top flight women pilots as members of that club. Perhaps in another year there'll be Soroptimist Clubs in Uruguay and even down in Argentina. And then here in New York, we have real adventures in friendship through Soroptimism because we have former members of the Vienna Club, the Berlin Club, clubs all through England as members of our New York Club. In addition to helping with that nursing school in Lanzhou, the Soroptimists have also carried on local projects and regional projects including fellowships for women for special training. One of them has been in plastic surgery. (4:01)

[ER:] That does seem interesting.

[Helen Stevens:] Well, the Soroptimist Clubs are somewhat I—as I say, like the Rotary Clubs, they've had a common beginning. So I was very happy when I was in China to address the Rotary Club of Lanzhou, and when I came back, I went out to Wichita, Kansas, and told them about the Rotary Club in China because Wichita and Lanzhou have the same population. The Rotary Club out in Lanzhou had twenty-three members, eleven of whom spoke English. In Wichita, which has a very strong Soroptimist Club, the Rotary Club has 120 members and they all speak English.

[ER:] Ah yes. [ER laughs] Well, since Iran is your special interest Mrs. Stevens, do you think that the women of Iran, after so few years of freedom, are ready to participate in an international organization of business and professional women?

[Helen Stevens:] The woman of Iran are really remarkable since they've had freedom such a short time, but there are women doctors, excellently trained, there are some women studying law, and there are women teachers. One of the great shortages in Iran today is for trained nurses and I'm hoping very much that we can make progress in setting-up a training school for nurses there.

[ER:] That is wonderful! Now, we have hardly any time, but is there something you'd like me to answer very quickly before you go? Well—

[Helen Stevens:] I should like very much to know what you think that we in America can learn from the women of the world.

[ER:] Oh, I feel we can learn an infinite amount, but perhaps the best thing we could learn is their courage in conditions that we haven't even learned to face, and their steadfastness in moving forward in spite of all their handicaps. Now, I think our time is up, though there's so much more that I'd like to talk about. I thank you for being our guest today, Helen Kennedy Stevens, and now we'll have to say goodbye and back to my daughter, Anna, in Hollywood.

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