



Leta Best: Volunteering for Life

One of my most pleasant duties as Chair of the Notary Foundation is attending IOLTA meetings.

IOLTA is the acronym for Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts, a sub-section of the American Bar Association (ABA).

As I listened to the Honourable Lora Livingston, Trustee, Texas Equal Access to Justice Foundation, during her workshop, "Expanding Access to Justice through *Pro Se* Assistance Projects," two thoughts emerged.

The first is just how much we, The Society of Notaries Public of British Columbia, contribute through the Notary Foundation. Now in its 18th year, the Foundation has administered \$20,667,785 interest earned on Notaries' Trust Accounts.

Section 52(1) of the *Notaries Act* provides that these funds be used for legal education, legal research, legal aid and education, and continuing education for BC Notaries and applicants who enroll as Notaries.

To date we have contributed \$12,077,338 to the Legal Services Society of British Columbia. The workshop on "Expanding Access to Justice through *Pro*

Se Assistance Projects" brought home to me the fact that our Notary Foundation not only provides funds to the Legal Services Society, it provides Grants to agencies and societies in our province to help people help themselves. Visit our Website at www.notaries.bc.ca and click on our Foundation and its annual report. You will be amazed by the organizations that our IOLTA funds have assisted.

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The second thought was about my volunteer life and the types of organizations in which I have been involved. I feel I have completed a full circle in my volunteer life.

While my children were growing up, I was involved in their school lives and outside activities of Brownies, Cubs, baseball, softball, curling, and soccer. I did all the usual Mom things like baking and accompanying the children on school outings. I acted as concession mom at the ballparks and coached the girls' softball team. I fundraised for junior curling and transported team members about. But I never thought, at that time, that I was a volunteer; I was just being a mom.



My awareness of my volunteer life began when I joined Zonta International in 1984. Founded in 1919, Zonta International is a global service organization of executives in business and the professions working together, across political and social boundaries, to advance the status of women worldwide. One of the objects of Zonta International is to improve the legal, political, economic, educational, health, and professional status of women. Again, as when I was involved with my children, I still did not see myself as a volunteer; I saw myself as a member of an international organization of people working together on a mutual objective.

Zonta afforded me an opportunity to hone my leadership skills and gain confidence in public speaking. I began my growth in community service as the treasurer of our local club, going through the chairs to become the club president. Continuing on in Zonta at the district and international levels, I eventually became one of seven world Directors-at-Large.

Previously, while serving as one of 30 world governors, another governor said I had the potential to go farther in my Zonta career but I needed more experience in public speaking. She suggested I take a Dale Carnegie course, which I did. That training was probably the most important self-improvement course I have ever taken.

It taught me self-confidence and the ability to present myself and my ideas to others. I firmly believe that without the opportunities afforded to me by Zonta to learn those skills, I wouldn't be writing this article today. You can learn more about Zonta International at www.zonta.org.

Through my more than 20 years with Zonta, I have grown from a person whose hands would perspire if asked to stand up and tell my name and what I did for a living, to being able to stand on a stage at the convention centre in Paris, France, and address an audience of 3000.

In the late 1980s, through my affiliation with Zonta, I was appointed to the Board of Directors of the United Way of Victoria. I began to understand the true meaning of volunteering. During my term as a Board member, I started to think of myself—and still do today—as a United Way Volunteer. Then I realized just how long I been serving in that capacity! The United Way of Victoria can be found at <http://unitedwayvictoria.bc.ca>.

I continued my own personal growth through my affiliation with the United Way. At this point in my Zonta life, I was mainly involved at the local level and had not experienced a volunteer Board working with executive directors and paid staff. The United Way taught me about that very important component in community organizations.

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Zonta also afforded me another important lesson. Not only was Zonta an international a service organization, it was affiliated with the Zonta Foundation, an organization with a separate Board of Governors, budget, and goals. The Zonta Foundation, while clearly allied with Zonta International, was an entity unto itself.

As you read through this article, I am sure you will begin to see a clear pattern of my volunteer life and how each of my experiences has lead me to my position today and helped me better serve The Society of Notaries Public of British Columbia and the Notary Foundation.

The parallel between Zonta and our Society structures was very clear and my experiences concurrently enhanced my performance with both organizations.

While serving on the United Way Board, I was asked to chair the Admission Committee, serve on the Allocations Committee, and sit as Board liaison to United Way Agencies. Two of the agencies for whom I acted as liaison were Volunteer Victoria, <http://www.volunteervictoria.bc.ca>, and Victoria Family Abuse Prevention Society, <http://www.familyviolence.ca/splash.htm>.

The Admission Committee afforded me an opportunity to interview agencies seeking admission to the United Way of Victoria, learn about the organization, understand the funding, examine financial statements, meet the executive Directors,

and review the role of the volunteer component of the association.

The Allocations Committee offered me the possibility to see the distribution of the community dollars raised by the United Way put to use in our area. As liaison to Volunteer Victoria, I saw how an organization was created solely to seek and train volunteers to serve other volunteer organizations. It taught me it was important to seek volunteers from all age groups, especially our seniors.

But to me, the greatest lesson I learned as a United Way Volunteer was the difference the Victoria Family Abuse Prevention Society could make in our community.

The program that affected me the most was the Family Violence Project. The program is for men who have been abusive and women who have been in an abusive relationship. Through counselling, the abuse pattern is stopped, thereby affording the next generation an opportunity to pursue a life free of abuse. To me, this was also one of the most important goals of Zonta International. The two organizations, in my estimation, were closely linked and had common goals that were important to me.

At the same time as I was serving on the United Way Board and as a member of the Zonta Club of Victoria and moving my way through the various levels of Zonta International, I ran for and was elected to the Board of Directors of our Society. By then, I was beginning to understand I was not just a volunteer; I was well on my way to becoming what I would later come to call myself: a "Professional Volunteer."

As I entered into my volunteer life with our Society, I left the United Way Board after one three-year term. I was first elected to the Board of Directors of The Society in 1988 and have served continuously since that time. And I was working my way up in Zonta. It would take me another 17 years to fully realize a deep connection between my volunteering with Zonta, the United Way, our Society, and the Notary Foundation.



Photo credit: vansportraits.com

*Let's grandchildren:
Kale, Alana, and Sean Best*

My first years on The Society Board were a learning experience but I brought to the Board an understanding of the relationship between a volunteer Board, an executive director, and a paid staff. This was an important tool to help me work effectively as a Board member.

By the mid '90s, I was at the international level of Zonta, working at Headquarters in Chicago. There my understanding expanded to include comprehension of the interaction between the service club side of Zonta and the Zonta Foundation. This knowledge and experience I was able to use to further enhance my ability to serve our Society and Foundation.

In 1998, my two-year term as a Director for Zonta International was complete; I remain on the international level, serving a two-year term as Chair of Public Relations.

By the end of my term as an international Chair in Zonta, I realized I wanted to expand my commitment to our Society. Serving in the executive positions of our Society was an eight-year commitment and I needed to downsize my involvement with one of the two organizations, to better serve them both.

Not only was it important to me do a good job for The Society, by now I also had three grandchildren who needed me.

In 1998, I was elected Second Vice President of our Society and in September of 2006, I will complete my term as Immediate Past President. Through my time on the executive, I have also served as a Governor of the Notary Foundation and am just completing my first year as Foundation Chair.

This brings me to a point in my volunteer life that I experienced at the IOLTA meeting I attended in Chicago, Illinois, in August. It struck me as very coincidental that I should come to the realization in the very same city where my international experience began and where my daughter Elizabeth has chosen to live. My circle of volunteering was about to become complete.

I first attended an IOLTA meeting last February in Salt Lake City, Utah. IOLTA is committed to "Equal Access to Justice" and the ABA is committed to "Defending Liberty Pursuing Justice." The commitment to equal access to justice is in every thought and action. A large part of the funding for the access to justice is from the interest on lawyers' trust accounts in the United States and Canada. In BC, we—The Society of Notaries Public of British Columbia—provide a second source of funding through the Notary Foundation. British Columbia is the only state or province to have two voices: that of the Law Foundation of British Columbia and the Notary Foundation of BC.

I'm now going to be the very best grandmother that I can be.

I realized at the IOLTA meeting that I was today, as I had been in 1984 when I joined Zonta, working with an organization that was seeking equality and justice. Whether it was Zonta, the United Way, or the Notary Foundation, each was working not only to advance the status of women but to advance the status of all people. Each has a deep commitment to the people it serves.

My life as a volunteer has afforded me education, opportunities, personal growth, and a world of fun and friends. I look forward to the rest of my life, a time to go back to the beginning and volunteer in my grandchildren's lives. I'm now going to be the very best grandmother that I can be.

I have been very fortunate in what I have been able to do in my volunteer life and extremely grateful in the opportunities it has afforded me.

I have come full circle. ▲

Notary Leta Best is the Immediate Past President of The Society of Notaries Public of BC and current Chair of the Notary Foundation. She practises in Victoria, BC.