

Meet SIA President Machiko Yamada

President Machiko Yamada was born in Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, and moved to Wakayama City when her father transferred for work during World War II. Her father, who was in a position of trust, did not return home—not even when he was sick. He passed away when Machiko was 3 and her brother was a year old. The family then evacuated to her aunt's house in Gotenba City, Shizuoka Prefecture. The war ended when Machiko was 6, and she and her family returned to Nishinomiya City—where Machiko's mother worked as a high school teacher—when she was 9. As her grandfather had passed away, Machiko's paternal grandmother lived with and took care of the family. Machiko credits her grandmother, Masa Washio, with having a very great influence on her.

Masa was born in 1873 into a samurai family in Kyoto and raised as a Christian. She met and married Dr. William, who was associated with Rikkyo University. She told her grandchildren about him at every opportunity, always with great respect. In Yamaguchi and Kyoto, where her grandfather was transferred, Masa had worked for Kyofu-kai, an organization created for women beyond the borders of Christian sects. This organization was engaged in various activities for promoting women in a society that retained old customs. These activities were to abolish the public prostitution system, to establish a home for women who were cast out from society, to implement temperance and anti-smoking movements, and to work for the suffragette movement. While Masa was taking care of the family, she still worked for the benefit of others, even though she barely had time to read the newsletters from Kyofu-kai. Masa often spoke to Machiko about women's rights, but Machiko was too young to understand the wisdom of her grandmother's words.

Machiko and her husband, Hiroshi, met through their grandfathers. Hiroshi was raised in Tokyo. After their marriage, they moved back to Yamaguchi Prefecture because Machiko's husband was taking over his grandfather's business. They began living with Hiroshi's grandparents. Although Machiko was a graduate of Doshisha University, the beginning of her marriage was spent in the home and taking care of Hiroshi's grandparents. "I knew little about how society worked," she says.

All of that has changed, since for the past 27 years Machiko has been a busy working woman. She currently works with her husband at four locations in three different jobs—one of which is running more than 20 gas stations in the prefecture. In 1981, the company started a department dealing in jewelry and women's items, and Machiko worked as a store manager in the two stores. Machiko and her husband hold annual exhibitions at 11 locations in the prefecture. They also run a golf course with nine holes near the Seto Inland Sea near their house. The property includes leisure facilities with six types of baths, 10 types of saunas, and restaurants on the premises. Machiko serves as executive director of the leisure facilities.

Additionally, she works two or three days a week as a part-time administrative director of Yamaguchi Prefecture Workers' Insurance Cooperative Society. The present chairman of the society, an acquaintance of Hiroshi's, coincidentally heard Machiko talking on a radio show about Soroptimist, and later asked her to work for this cooperative, which offers low premium rates to its members and today has 180,000 members.

As the wife of a past-governor of the Rotary Club, Machiko has attended world conventions since 1995. She currently lives with Hiroshi, her daughter, Asako, and her husband, Masatoshi, and their two children, Yujiro, 14, and Shotaro, 16. Her other daughter, Noriko, and her husband, Hisayoshi, live in Hiroshima City and have two children, Yasuyuki, 6, and Risa, 8.

In addition to attending church every Sunday (both Machiko and her husband come from third generation Christian families), Machiko enjoys traveling and watching plays. Five years ago Machiko broke her leg, which caused her to have invasive surgery in which 16 pieces of nail-like hardware were inserted into her ankle. She had originally been planning to climb up to Machu Picchu, and after a difficult rehabilitation program is proud to report that she accomplished her goal this past June.

Meet Machiko Yamada, SIA's 2007-2008 federation president.

What first attracted you to the Soroptimist organization?

I was asked to join SI/Tokuyama after my grandparents-in-law passed away. SI/Tokuyama was a very new club. I was hoping to make some friends through taking part in activities, as I did not have any in the area. Then, 12 years ago, I transferred to SI/Kudamatsu when it was sponsored by SI/Tokuyama.

Why has your involvement with Soroptimist continued, and how has Soroptimist membership affected your life?

The biggest reason for my continued involvement with Soroptimist are the friends I have made through club activities. Although those friends and I occasionally disagree about how we should develop Soroptimist activities, club administration and the services we provide—I am grateful to them as I learn through their opinions. Services vary from those we provide to our immediate families and neighbors, to international services. My involvement with my club has helped me foster a broader view of the world. I do what I can while maintaining a balance between club activities and my jobs.



What part does Soroptimist play in the life of a busy working woman?

Sharing the happiness and burdens of the people I am helping through volunteer service is very important to me. As working women, our volunteer time is quite limited so it's important that our time be spent in meaningful ways.

What are some of the challenges of being a non-English speaking president when most of the federation's business is conducted in English?

I have been struggling with lots of e-mail written in English since I took up the role of president. Because I have difficulty understanding English, I have some documents translated into Japanese. It stresses me that I cannot respond to the mail immediately. As I usually start receiving e-mail from the States at midnight, I go to bed at 1 or 2 a.m. For a couple of hours in the morning, I read and respond to email. I give my schedule to my three workplaces and try to juggle the many demands on my time. Luckily, I am supported by the members of my club, which is a big help.

What are younger women in Japan looking for from an organization like Soroptimist?

I would like to know the answer! Including myself, members of great clubs

with long histories tend to think in terms of "Well we've always done it this way." I think it's important that older members accept the fresh ideas of younger women and that both groups develop mutual understanding and respect. I believe that if we succeed in operating the clubs based on the principles of the Renaissance Campaign, younger and seasoned members will find a way to work together in a way that benefits the club, as well as the people we're serving. I think it will build a bridge between the generations, which is important because we are seeing less and less communication between the young and the old in Japanese society. Those of us who are older wish to learn from the younger people, while imparting wisdom to them at the same time.

How are women in Japan being helped by Soroptimist programs, particularly with regard to issues like domestic violence that until recently weren't widely discussed in Japanese society?

At first when we began learning about domestic violence and other sensitive issues, most Japanese members were not open to the idea. A lot of us thought, "There is little domestic violence in Japan. And even if there is, no women will want to discuss their painful personal experiences in public. Most of the women must want to be left alone because these experiences are something to be ashamed of." Thanks to the brave clubs that started to work on these issues—even though it was not easy—the other clubs gradually deepened their understanding toward these problems. As they began listening to women at region conferences telling their stories, club members started realizing that these problems are, in fact, widespread. I believe that through education and seeing first-hand the women we can

help, support for these issues in Japan will continue to grow.

What are the most pressing organizational issues facing SIA, and what are your ideas to address them?

I think that SIA's most pressing organizational issue is membership. Fortunately, SIA has solid programs that are attractive to prospective members and help to retain existing members. But still, it is difficult to lead women to join our clubs. I take attracting members as a serious issue as we enter the final stage of the Renaissance Campaign.

What are your specific goals for your year as SIA president and how will the Renaissance Campaign affect your focus?

My main goal is to continue generating participation in the Renaissance Campaign, which I believe is key to our future. Taking into account all that happened at the SI board meeting and our recent Soroptimist Professional Development Seminar, we will be making changes in our direction and policies as necessary. But we must always remember that the world's women and girls need our help as they disproportionately suffer from society's ills. And, we cannot help these women if we do not have a strong and growing membership (one of my goals is to see the recruitment of more members in South America). Those concepts must be at the forefront of everything we do. I'd like to thank, in advance, the members of the clubs, Board and staff at headquarters for supporting me when I cannot easily make myself understood in English. ☺



President Machiko in traditional dress with SI/Kudamatsu members.