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Senator Nelson's Regional Director Addresses Zonta Club

By Darla Letourneau

Stacey Smith, Regional Director for Senator Bill Nelson, was the guest speaker at Zonta's recent breakfast meeting at Beachview Steakhouse and Grill. As the Regional Director based in Fort Myers since 2004, Stacey has been Senator Nelson's "eyes and ears" in 8 counties, primarily in Southwest Florida. Prior to working for Senator Nelson, she was a professional staff member on the Joint Economic Committee, working for Senator Connie Mack. She was invited to talk to the Club about how to be an effective advocate at the Federal, State, and local levels to further Zonta's mission of advancing the legal, political, economic, education, health, and professional status of women.

Stacey gave the members a behind-the-scenes description of what activities go on in a congressional office and detailed the difference between the District/State staff and the Washington, D.C. staff. She encouraged members to start their contacts with the local/district office, to attend town hall meetings or roundtable discussions hosted by elected officials visiting our local area. She said that elected officials remember the questions raised and come away from those meetings with an impression of the pressing issues in a geographic region. These town hall meetings also attract media coverage, which provides an opportunity to reach a broader audience on the issues in the community that we are trying to draw attention to, such as human trafficking or the need for more addiction services in our area. She cited the Club's work on human trafficking as an example of how our advocacy had been effective in putting this issue on Senator Nelson's radar screen.

As Stacey pointed out, in any advocacy effort, it is important to reach out to the appropriate level of government. If the issue of concern is a Federal policy or budget matter, it is appropriate to contact your Federal elected officials. If the local and/or State government has jurisdiction over the issue, then we should contact them.

Stacey summed up how to be effective advocates for advancing the status of women by saying, "It's all about relationships. You have to develop and cultivate relationships with officials at all levels of government over a sustained period of time. Even when you don't agree with the positions of the officials you are dealing with, you need to keep the channels of communication open. That is how you can be most effective."

Past President, Darla Letourneau, discussed the Club's advocacy work. Zonta International has encouraged local Clubs to combine advocacy with its service projects in order to have the maximum impact on the lives of women. For the past three years, the local Sanibel-Captiva Club has focused on three strategic areas—helping young women transition from foster care to self-sufficiency; helping women transition from addiction to self-sufficiency; and eradicating human trafficking (the majority of these victims are women). Darla said, "The concept of partnering with the service organizations we have chosen (SWFAS, FCHAT, GMIOP) includes advocacy. We want to use our collective

voice to persuade the community, the media, and our elected officials that the issues our partners are addressing are important and deserve the community's support and funding. We are also advocates for our partner organizations, recognizing their contributions publicly, and providing moral support and assistance to the staff."

Induction of New Member Evelyn Neill, Program Director of Sanibel Sea School

Also at this meeting, Evelyn Neill was inducted and welcomed into the Club by President Nola Theiss. Evelyn arrived on Sanibel last Spring and founded, along with her husband, Dr. Bruce Neill, the new Sanibel Sea School which promotes marine conservation through experiential education. She is an accomplished conservation advocate, and serves as the Sea School's Program Director. She has a degree in theater and has acting experience. Most of her career has been in advertising, and was the creative director in several international advertising firms in New York City prior to moving to Sanibel. She is the proud mother of two young daughters. She is sponsored by Caroline Hoisington.

The Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva is a service organization of professional women working together to provide hands on assistance, advocacy, and funds to strengthen women's lives on the islands, in Lee County, and around the world through Zonta International. Additional information is available at www.zontasancap.com.