

## **SUCSESSES FOR UNA AND THE REGIONAL COUNCIL**

**Rene Wilson, Speaker**

**2009 Annual Meeting, UNA-USA Southern California Division**

### **US Commission on Improving the Effectiveness of the United Nations and the Southern California Regional Council of Organizations**

In November of 1992 when I was President of the Southern California Division of UNA, I received a phone call from the Executive Director of the *U.S. Commission on Improving the Effectiveness of the United Nations* asking me to put together a group of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to host the Commission's February 1, 1993 Public Hearings in Los Angeles. This meant financing it, also. I agreed.

In a little over two months our printed program listed 26 well-known individuals as Honorary Hosts, a Host Coalition of 23 NGOs, a group of 70 contributors and a Planning Committee of 23. Some fine people joined us. The NGO coordinating team was the United Nations Association, Friends of the UN, and World Federalists.

We held a reception for Commissioners in the home of the UCLA Chancellor, and commission members were housed on the UCLA campus. The Hearing opened with Remarks by Co-Chair James Leach, initiator of the Commission and Congressional Representative from Iowa. The Commission was welcomed by Executive Vice Chancellor Andrea Rich on behalf of UCLA and myself on behalf of the Host Coalition. Testifying at a very successful all-day hearing at UCLA were prominent citizens, elected officials, professors, corporate representatives, NGOs, and students. As an example, going into the record included testimony from Senator Alan Cranston, Assistant Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Zalmay Khalizad; Edwin Smith, USC Professor of Law; Jane Jaquette, Occidental College Professor of Politics; and Carroll Cannon from the UNA in San Diego County. The result was improved visibility and stature for UNA and participating non-governmental organizations.

Afterwards, some of the NGOs found they enjoyed working together so much that they wanted to stay together. So, with the support of UNA nationally, we wrote to the UNA-USA Southern California Division asking to be affiliated with them in the same manner the 150-member Council of Organizations was affiliated with national. Thus was born the Southern California Regional Council of Organizations, which has now increased in size from about nine to 25 or more NGOs. This has enlarged by many fold the voices supporting the United Nations and providing public education and advocacy in Southern California.

### **Background and Conference: *Why Worry about World Health?***

In March 2001 during the time I was Chair of the S.C. Regional Council of Organizations, the national UNA-USA Convention adopted a Resolution on International Health and one covering the HIV/AIDS Crisis. The latter stated that the continent of Africa was ravaged by a startling 25.3 million infected people and that Africa had 13 million AIDS orphans.

Four months later in July 2001 the Board of the Southern California Regional Council of Organizations adopted a goal to be initiated during the first part of 2002 for participating NGOs in collaboration with appropriate others. The objective would be to make the public aware of the many ways the United Nations is engaged in Global Health and to motivate citizens to become effective advocates in support of expanded US participation in international efforts to curb infectious diseases with emphasis on Africa.

The background for this objective was the disturbing tendency by Americans to ignore the reality of global interdependence. Evident was... \*reduced governmental support for the UN system in the 1990s, \*an estrangement between the US and the UN, \*a public support of international cooperation based on a thin understanding of this country's global connections, and \*an ignorance of specific United Nations programs.

By March 2002, the Regional Council had reached agreement with the UCLA School of Public Health and Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science to be collaborators, and, in consultation with them, had chosen October 12, 2002, as the Conference date; selected a new Magnet High School as the venue; and invited the Keynote Speaker. A Joint Program Planning Committee, representing experienced health leaders from the universities and NGOs, began meeting in April. At the same time, areas of "Coordination," such as Administration, Media, Registration, and Sponsors, were being carried out by NGO leaders.

The conference topic was *Why Worry about World Health?* Featured speaker Stephen Lewis was a former Canadian Ambassador to the U.N., and an experienced politician, diplomat, and humanitarian who had been appointed Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Program participants selected were from the World Health Organization, UCLA School of Public Health, US Centers for Disease Control, Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, Drew Center for AIDS Research, African Community Resource Center, International African Refugee Women's Network, International Medical Corps, Global Health Corps, as well as other individuals for their special expertise.

One of the busiest NGO areas was solicitation of conference *Sponsors*. There was an assumption by Regional Council Board members and the *Sponsors* Committee Chair that the conference would be a perfect vehicle for pharmaceutical companies. This proved to be an erroneous assumption. Without fail, all 30 plus companies contacted had prior commitments to previously identified charitable causes, budgets had been allocated to cover these commitments and no funds were available for unidentified events. Actual funding for the Conference came from foundations accustomed to funding community-based events and are well known in the LA area. The committee on conference *Angels* garnered support from individuals and organizations.

All attendees and supporters received a 52-page Summary Report with pictures. About one-third of conferees completed an evaluation form. Highest marks for Program Excellence went to the Keynote Speaker for his outstanding knowledge, passion, and delivery, followed closely by Overall Learning Experience and Conference Organization and Expertise of Panelists. Kudos were given also to Registration and the Facility. Overall, a great deal of positive recognition was

gained for both the Council and UNA. In consultation with the Division Treasurer, the Regional Council's final conference financials showed a welcome net gain.

### **Global Policy Project**

A couple years after I joined UNA in 1980, the national UNA Board in NY initiated what came to be known as the Global Policy Project. It was conceived as an annual program to engage UNA's various constituencies in an analysis of a single significant UN/multilateral issue with the development of recommendations for adoption as policy positions. Chapters and Divisions and interested affiliated non-governmental organizations were guided by a publication prepared by staff and all reports with recommendations were considered and worked into a single report by a high level advisory panel representing the position of UNA as an organization. The GPP enabled many chapters and divisions to widen the reach of their programs to leaders and the general public within their communities. Over time, some of national's high-level panel members included Robert McNamara, Elliot Richardson, Edmund Muskie, Cyrus Vance and James Woolsey.

For various reasons, including costs, after 14 years, this program was discontinued, and UNA chapters and divisions lost this means to educate, mobilize, advocate and recruit. At the time this happened, I was Co-Coordinator of the UNA-USA National Council, a group of more than 100 distinguished individuals who brought their experience and expertise in international affairs to support the mission and goals of UNA. In 1998 a small committee of the National Council was formed to undertake the compilation of the positions reached from each of these studies and to find the funds to publish a Compendium of UNA-USA Policy Positions 1984-97 with yours truly as Editor. Some of you may have been present at the national UNA convention in 1999 when I presented the first copy of the *Compendium* to Ambassador William Luers, incoming president of the Association.

Initially through a Board committee, and later through preparation of Strategic Plans, a few of us, and occasionally the Council of Chapters & Divisions Steering Committee, pursued the reinstatement of an updated version of the Global Policy Project but to no avail. Statements and positions, without study, basically came to be the purview of the President and national Board Chairs and, later, a sizable advocacy committee and published Advocacy Agenda for field use. The exception was not a study but a survey starting with a Global Issues briefing paper in the 1993 spring issue of the *Interdependent* followed by a Questionnaire to be returned by UNA members to the Advocacy Department.

(Pera Wells, immediate past Secretary-General of the World Federation of UNAs, shared with me last year that in 2007 in response to her inquiry, she was told that members of UNA-USA would not be interested in participating in the World Federation's cross-countries' *Study Circles* on Climate Control.)

Anticipating a change of administrations, early this year the Board of Directors of the Southern California Division took the initiative and introduced a Business Resolution for debate at the

2009 UNA-USA June Convention supporting the resumption of the Global Policy Project. With diligence to the Convention process, the Resolution passed overwhelmingly.

This success comes at a no ordinary time. The message cast by our new UNA-USA President concerning carrying out this Resolution is that there are no unrestricted funds available and minimal staff. So, the Resolution's suggested *Global Policy Project Fund*, which the national president supports, is high on the list of probabilities.

Currently, the reality is that after a lapse of eleven years this means taking time to make sure everyone (national Board and committees, UNA members, chapters, NGOs, National Council, YPIC, etc) understands that their own participation in the study each year is important for a representative final report.. So, Southern California UNA members need to use every opportunity to help chapters and divisions across the country to keep the ball rolling to get the GPP going again. With new studies and up to date positions, I predict UNA advocacy will thrive!

*Rene Wilson: 1990-93 President, Southern California UNA Division; 1993 Co-Founder & 1998-2002 Chair, Southern California Regional Council of Organizations; 1996-2001 Co-Coordinator, UNA--USA National Council; and 2001-09 Member, UNA-USA Board of Directors and the UNA-USA Council of Chapters and Divisions Steering Committee.*