

Reclaiming the Dream:

Chie Chinone

I believe there are three aspects to ‘being independent’—financial independence, psychological independence, and livelihood independence. Those who make their own living, do not psychologically depend on anyone else, and take care of their home can be said to be independent because they achieve these three.” Chie Chinone of Chiba prefecture, Japan, wrote this five years ago in her application for the Soroptimist Women’s Opportunity Award.

Chie became aware of these three aspects when her husband suddenly told her that he wanted to separate and left their home without telling her his future whereabouts. Chie and her two elementary school-age sons were left behind. Although Chie had worked for a company for five years, she had quit the job after becoming married, which is customary in Japan. She stayed home and focused on housework and childcare. For a while after the separation, her husband sent some money for living costs, but soon the money came less frequently, and her life fell apart. Chie hit rock bottom financially and emotionally, and she became painfully aware that she had not been independent.

A New Start

Chie pulled herself together and started looking for a way out. First, she got certified as a registered home-care worker and started working with the elderly. She learned the joy of making people happy through her job and felt that she had discovered a direction in which to move forward. “I found that I loved working in a job that involved human interaction,” she said. However, a home-care worker is not allowed to perform any assistance that is considered medical and she felt limited in what she could do for the people for whom she cared. And, even though being a home-care worker is emotionally rewarding, her income was unreliable because she was paid by the hour. Chie then decided to learn about medicine and nursing, and enrolled in the Funabashi Municipal Nursing College.

Chie was a student in her 40s, which is extremely rare in Japan. She took courses with students in their teens and 20s, who gave Chie the nickname of “Mama.” It was a three-year, full-time program, and there was no time to earn a living. Using alimony from her husband and a scholarship, she managed to pay her tuition and her living expenses for her and her sons. Sometimes she had to study until 2 or 3 a.m. after her internship at a hospital. Of course, she still had to take care of house chores and raising her children. “I focused on my goal and my school life was very fulfilling, but it was physically challenging and I was often exhausted and dead on my feet,” Chie says. “My sons’ support kept me going.”

Chie learned about the Soroptimist Women’s Opportunity Awards from an acquaintance of her father’s. At first, she was hesitant to apply, but after more thought decided to try. Chie was nominated by SI/Funabashi and became a 2004-

2005 Japan Higashi Region recipient. “It was hard to believe. But I was so glad that there was someone who cared about me and recognized what I was doing,” Chie remembered. “In the field of nursing, we often use the word ‘self-efficacy,’ which means feeling confident and believing that you can do something on your own. It is an important job of a nurse to give this feeling of ‘self-efficacy’ to patients. In my case, I was able to feel ‘self-efficacy’ myself thanks to the Soroptimists who recognized my effort through the award.”

Chie used the award money to pay her tuition. She also bought a computer, which she had wanted to buy for a long time. “I didn’t have time to go to the computer room at school to do my homework and write papers. You can’t imagine how helpful it was to have a computer at home for a woman like me. I still cherish the computer, which is just so convenient.”

Chie graduated from the nursing school in March 2007. She was the top student; she earned the highest average in her subjects. Because she had performed extremely well in her practical training as well, she received the “Governor’s Award for Chiba Prefecture.” Chie started working for a general hospital and is currently working for a rehabilitation facility helping patients to recover from brain disorders. Working as a nurse gives her both financial stability and confidence as a professional who is involved in the lives of others to help them become psychologically independent.

Chie now has a new dream. In her community, the population is rapidly aging and the number of senior citizens who live by themselves is growing. She desires to provide home-visit nursing care so that more senior citizens will be able to live happily and independently in their communities. “After gaining enough experience as a nurse in hospitals, I would like to start helping people in my community through home-visits,” she stated.

Chie hopes Soroptimist continues to provide emotional as well as financial support for women who are in situations like the one in which she had been. “Even when things are not going well, it is important to change your view point and live positively,” she adds. To do that, however, emotional support is essential. The Soroptimists gave me the support I desperately needed.”

By Aki Naganuma, Japanese Translator
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By participating in the Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Awards program, clubs can make a profound difference in the lives of women like Chie. Without generous donations from clubs and individuals, it would not be possible to continue this program. To make a donation or to download program materials, visit <Soroptimist.org>. 🌐

Reclaiming the Dream:

Francine Nunziata

Like most of Soroptimist's Women's Opportunity Award recipients, Francine Nunziata did not have an easy life. She grew up in a household where she experienced physical, emotional, verbal and sexual abuse at the hands of her alcoholic father. Her mother did her best to protect the children, but she was fearful of repercussions from Francine's father if any attempt was made to escape.

"Once my mother was able to flee with us, we were forced to live with my uncle and subjected to degrading and abusive treatment, which only reinforced our low self-esteem," says Francine, 56, of Gloversville, New York. "At the early age of 10, I started drinking to mask my pain."

Francine then fell into drug abuse, which continued until she entered a rehab program at the age of 45. She struggled to become drug and alcohol free and finally did so because of one motivation—her four children.

"As a result of my addictions and the choices I had made, my children were taken from me and placed into foster care," she says. "During the 18 months they were in foster care, I knew I had to give them the childhood I was denied."

While in recovery, she met a man she thought was "good" and could "help make them a family," but found herself once again a victim of domestic violence. After being with him for five years, she finally escaped with her children, and had some very financially difficult times.

"I have been employed in many entry-level positions throughout my life, but I wanted to do so much more," she says. "So I enrolled at Fulton Montgomery Community College where one day I saw a flyer on the wall about the Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Awards. I was at a point in my life where I was really feeling down and tired of being poor—and was thinking about quitting school and just going back to work."

After applying for the award, she received the good news. Not only had SI/Fulton County, New York, named her its recipient, awarding her \$2,000—but North Atlantic Region recognized her as its 2006-2007 recipient, awarding her an additional \$5,000. "I was really shocked and it was such an honor," she says. "I felt special."

Thanks to the awards, Francine was able to continue her studies and in May 2011, graduated from SUNY Albany, New York, with a bachelor's degree in social work. She is currently employed as a domestic violence advo-

cate at The Family Counseling Center, in Gloversville, providing support and information services to women in abusive relationships.

Working with women in her community to help empower and educate them is living a dream close to her heart, she says. There were times she thought she would not survive and would not be able to enjoy the personal freedom she experiences today, if not for the support of domestic violence programs and Soroptimist.

"I really felt the love from your organization," she states, "and it gave me the boost to continue going to school."

Her involvement with Soroptimist did not end after receiving the Women's Opportunity Awards. When she was chosen for a Habitat for Humanity Home in Fulton County, SI/Fulton County members stepped in to help. The Habitat program renovates and builds houses, and requires that the family complete 500 hours of sweat equity, working on their own home, or another Habitat home.

Pam Frascatore, immediate past North Atlantic Region governor and a 24-year-member of SI/Fulton County says, "SI/Fulton County has provided volunteers on more than one occasion to do painting, landscaping and other odd jobs to help Francine and her family complete the required hours of sweat equity.

"Our club has had the advantage of seeing just how much of an opportunity for changing the lives of women and their families this award carries," Pam says.

As a result of her positive experiences with Soroptimist, Francine became a member of SI/Fulton County in June. She has already committed to several committees with the club, most notably the Women's Opportunity Award review program, the Adopt-a-Family Project and the holiday wreath sale.

As to becoming a Soroptimist, Francine says, "My main reason for joining was because when I had received the Soroptimist Fulton County club award, I stated that I would one day love to have the circle completed by watching someone I assisted in improving their life also win this award. So now I am one step closer to achieving that goal. I also believe that helping others is part of the reason for my being on earth." 🌍

By Marielena Zuniga

Reclaiming the Dream:

Sheila Burson

Sheila Burson, 58, of Oroville, California, calls herself “a big believer in never giving up.” She never gave up when she left an abusive marriage and hid in a women’s shelter with her two children. She never gave up when the only job she could find to survive was making pizza dough. And she never gave up when in 2004 she was in an auto accident, rear-ended by a car traveling at 70 miles per hour. She sustained a brain injury that resulted in short-term memory loss, moderate aphasia (language disorder), and intermittent balance disorder.

The crash was devastating in many ways. Sheila had always loved reading and writing, and now the impairment of her cognitive and speech skills seemed to end her lifelong dream—to channel those loves into a teaching career.

Ironically, Sheila’s upbringing didn’t foster education. “I was raised in an environment where education was not considered good for girls,” she says. “I was told to be a good wife, have a lot of kids and that was what was expected of me. But I would always read whatever I could get my hands on and always had a library card. And the books that piqued my interest were always those with a bit of history.”

With her dream to teach English and history seemingly lost forever, and unable to work, Sheila didn’t want to depend on government support. “I needed to do something other than sit and stare at the walls of my house,” she says, “and I was also fighting depression because I didn’t know where to turn.”

Sheila had experienced that feeling of desperation before. A native of California, she had moved to Missouri when she married. But then, without family or friends in the area, she struggled alone in an abusive relationship. In 2001, she left her husband, but he stalked her, despite a restraining order. Selling her house at a loss, she packed herself, her two small children and her belongings into a van and found sanctuary at a women’s shelter.

“The only job I could find was making pizza, but I never gave up on the idea that things would get better,” she says. She eventually found work as a full-time legal secretary, but then realized one day that she had no support systems in place in case of a catastrophe.

Her best friend suggested she return to California. So, for the second time in her life, Sheila started over with her two children, traveling across the country in a van and staying with her friend until she could find work. But then her accident happened.

With financial help from permanent disability coverage, Sheila saw a speech therapist who encouraged her to take a class at Butte College in Oroville with one goal in mind—a cognitive skills class to help with her problems.

When Sheila had the opportunity to return to school full time, she told herself she could do it, with the help of scholarships and grants. While at Butte, she learned about Soroptimist and applied for the Women’s Opportunity Award. Named the club recipient by SI/Chico (\$500) and then the SI/Sierra Nevada Region recipient (\$3,000 from SIA), Sheila says she was “grateful, shocked and thrilled all at the same time.”



Today, Sheila uses a special software program to read scanned texts two or three times, highlighting important sections. “Because of my short-term memory loss, I buy my text books as soon as I can and read them four or five times ... that way I can get the information into my head so by the time I get to class it makes sense.”

While at Butte, she also revitalized the college’s defunct literary magazine as part of her service to Phi Beta Kappa, an honors society for two-year colleges.

“It was one of my biggest joys serving as senior editor of Butte’s literary magazine, *Branches of Inspiration*, a task that allowed me to encourage other students to express themselves creatively through poetry, prose, artwork and photography,” she says. “It afforded me the opportunity to edit and show other students the joys of writing while showcasing their efforts for them to proudly show their families and friends.”

Graduating this past spring from Butte College with a dual major in English and history, Sheila transferred to Mills University in Oakland, California, to fulfill her dream of earning a degree in education.

While bad things have happened to her, she always has turned her life around by never giving up. “I have never given up in spite of obstacles,” says Sheila. “Every time I’ve had to start over it scared the daylights out of me, but I’ve always faced my fears, telling myself, ‘Here I go. I can do this.’”

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By participating in the Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Awards program, clubs can make a profound difference in the lives of women like Sheila. Without generous donations from clubs and individuals, it would not be possible to continue this program. To make a donation or to download program materials, visit <Soroptimist.org>. 🌐

Reclaiming the Dream:

Tamanika Ferguson

Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Awards recipients exemplify strength, courage and determination. The stories of how these women overcome great obstacles to create better lives for themselves and their families are truly inspirational. Some of these stories are featured in the Women's Opportunity Awards section at LiveYourDream.org.

Ever wonder what happens to past award recipients after their initial story has been told? Their journey does not usually end there. Many of them continue to grow, becoming extraordinary women who are not only positive role models for their children, but women everywhere.

It is always nice to hear from the many women whose lives have been touched by this award, to learn how they are, whether they accomplished their goals, and if they are now living their dream—a dream that at one time seemed impossible to attain.

SIA recently caught up with past recipient Tamanika Ferguson. Tamanika received a Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Award from SI/Verdugos, California, in 2004. Her story, which ran in the July 2005 issue of *Best for Women* magazine, portrayed a woman who started down the wrong road but was determined to turn her life around. Below is an excerpt from Tamanika's initial story.

Now eight years later, Tamanika is still going strong as she continues down the path of success. "The financial support I received from Soroptimist allowed me to continue my education without the impending threat of inter-

ruptions and having to incur additional educational expenses," she stated.

Not only did Tamanika complete her bachelor's degree, but she earned a master's degree in both African-American studies and sociology. She is also on the verge of starting a doctoral program in mass communication and media studies with a graduate certificate in women studies. Tamanika currently works at the YWCA National Capital Area in Washington, D.C., as a case manager, but plans to use her doctoral degree to teach at the university level.

"I am a woman living my dream. I have the opportunity to impact lives through the work I do and would advise all women and girls to earn a college education—to make education a life-long learning process and apply it to all areas of their lives."

Tamanika encourages her own daughter, who is all grown up now and has taken some college-level courses. Hopefully one day she will follow in her mother's footsteps and achieve success.

The Women's Opportunity Awards empower women like Tamanika to create positive changes in their lives. Any award, big or small, gives women the ability to succeed, and to measurably improve their lives and the lives of their families. Congratulations to Tamanika for having the courage and perseverance to make her dreams come true. 🌟

By Kamali Brooks
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The following is an excerpt from the Reclaiming the Dream article about Tamanika, which appeared in the July 2005 issue of *Best for Women*:

Growing up in a single-parent household, Tamanika lived in an environment where gang mentality and fast money were the way of life. By the age of 15, she was a high school dropout and the single mother of a baby girl. Entering a world of drugs and violence, Tamanika's life spiraled into a downward trend of self-destruction. Immersed in an environment that most would consider far from nurturing, Tamanika's dream of going to college and earning a degree seemed way beyond her reach.

"I did not have the support and guidance of positive role models, which I wholeheartedly believe play a key role in the growth and development of our youth today," Tamanika stated.

After living a life dictated by the streets, Tamanika realized she couldn't live that way forever. "It took many heart-breaking experiences and a longing for happiness before I realized the full impact of my choices and the effect they had on me and my family," she said. "I decided there was more to life than what the streets had to offer and decided to go back to school."

The first step on Tamanika's path to reclaiming her dream was to get her high school equivalency diploma. She then

applied to Long Beach City College, becoming the first person in her family to go to college. Tamanika struggled with her course work at times. "However, with my thirst for knowledge, determination, and support from encouraging and inspiring professors and my fellow classmates, I managed to do quite well."

In 2004, Tamanika graduated with a 3.25 grade point average and an associate's degree in liberal arts.

She then became a full-time student at California State University Dominguez Hills in Carson, California, where she pursued a bachelor's degree in African studies. Tamanika found, however, that juggling school, extracurricular activities and being the mom of a 12-year-old girl was challenging. She expressed feeling that she wanted to quit and get a full-time job because the cost of going school seemed like more than she could afford. But with the help of a \$600 Women's Opportunity Award, Tamanika was able to pay for basic necessities, such as books, supplies, transportation, parking and material fees.

That small amount of money and the confidence placed in her by SI/Verdugos was all it took to keep Tamanika on the right path.

Reclaiming the Dream:

Tina Poole

To listen to Tina Poole share her story and the overwhelming obstacles she endures on a daily basis, the obvious question comes to mind: How does she do it?

The 26-year-old from Vancouver, BC, Canada, was born missing her right arm up to her shoulder and is missing part of her left hand and three fingers. She is also the sole caregiver for her mother, who has epilepsy and Parkinson's Disease. Despite these struggles, Tina says, "I refuse to let anything stop me from achieving what I set out to accomplish."

That spirit led Tina to pursue her career goal of becoming a sports psychologist. But financing her continuing studies at Langara College in Vancouver and earning a degree had become increasingly difficult because of her parental situation. Her mother had to take early retirement due to the frequency and severity of her seizures, and because of her condition, she often requires ambulance transport to the hospital.

"This puts a burden on us financially," Tina says, "as do my mother's medications, which aren't cheap. Complicating matters, my dad left us a while ago. And since he left, my mom has really relied on me to keep an eye on her."

As the primary caregiver, Tina has to make sure her mother eats properly and often must help her to the washroom. Sometimes, she admits, she has to assist her off the floor and get her mother into bed.

"These challenges in my life have not been easy to overcome," she says. "They have affected me physically, emotionally and mentally. I care a lot for my mom and because her seizures are triggered by stress, I want her to live a stress-free life."

Watching her mother fight through her trials, however, inspired and motivated Tina to overcome her own disability and get a good job in the future. She realized that education was key to pursuing her dream of becoming a sports psychologist. With a lifelong love of sports, especially soccer and volleyball, she says she has had to overcome many obstacles "through sheer determination and creativity." For example, in physical education classes in high school, despite her disability, she often threw the ball over the net during volleyball games.

That drive to excel carried over into college, where one of her psychology teachers praised Tina as "an extraordinary student who had raised the level of the class to a high point I have not seen in 14 years of teaching college level psychology courses."

As Tina struggled financially to continue her studies, she learned about the Women's Opportunity Awards through an instructor. After applying, she learned that SI/Vancouver had awarded her \$3,000 as its club recipient, and through federation funds, she received \$5,000 as Western Canada Region's finalist.

The awards were "huge" in her life, she says, helping her pay tuition. They also helped her emotionally and mentally,

she says. "I could now focus on school more and not worry so much about the financial part."

Tina also received a laptop computer, through the federation Jackson Hewitt sponsorship, as a result of Western Canada Region reaching 100 percent club participation in the Women's Opportunity Awards. Despite her physical challenges, Tina can type an astonishing 50 words per minute.

"I just practice a lot. And because I'm missing an arm, it's so important to have the laptop so I can type all my notes. Having online access to my school with the computer is also huge."

After graduating in June 2011 with an associate's degree, Tina plans to transfer to the University of British Columbia to earn her bachelor's degree. There, her goals are to continue to study psychology and human kinetics (the study of the mechanics of the body) in preparation for a career as a sports psychologist.

In addition to school and caring for her mother, Tina has been trying to find work to help with her financial situation. But as with most women with disabilities, employment is often a hurdle (see the feature article about women with disabilities beginning on page 12). She shares the story of applying for a job at a local convenience store, only to be told by the employer that she couldn't do the job because of her disability. "Employers often don't look beyond the outside to see what's on the inside," she admits.

Remarkably, Tina also finds time to volunteer with the Canadian Cancer Society, doing administrative work. Why volunteer in addition to everything else she does?

"I want to give back to the community, she says. "Knowing what I've been through, I want to help people when they need it."

Ultimately, Tina admits this is her dream—helping others.

"I know what it's like having a disability and I know the challenges that come with it," she says. "I love sports and I want to help people be the best they can be."

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