



10 Women Making A Difference

By Lynn Armitage, Sandy Bennett,
Kevin O'Leary and Steve Thomas
Photos by Mark Savage

Women make a difference in all sorts of ways. Some are community builders, others deal makers. Some are politicians, others focus their energies on the nurturing skills that we associate with motherhood. Our 13th annual issue devoted to profiling 10 Orange County women who are making a difference is a diverse list. Their talent, achievements, energy and passion make Orange County a better place.

Two talented sisters - with Ph.D.s from Harvard and a special expertise on the Latino educational experience - grace our cover. Others included on this year's list are a mayor, a city councilwoman, a scholar on the Holocaust, a partner at construction giant Snyder Langston, the new chair of the Orange County Business Council, an education activist, a mentor for foster children and a woman who long ago decided she would rather take the bus than drive a car.

The Canadian rock sensation Avril Lavigne has a lyric in one of her songs, "I'd rather be anything but ordinary please." These 10 women meet the test of standing out from the crowd. By following their passions, they are making a difference.

[1. Karen L. Robinson](#)

Mayor of Costa Mesa; chief litigator for the Cal State University system.

[2. Christine Diemer Iger](#)

Partner at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips LLP; chair of the Orange County Business Council.

[3. Margarita Silva](#)

Associate professor of education, Concordia University.

[4. Norma Hernandez](#)

Assistant professor of human development and psychology, Concordia University.

[5. Jane Reifer](#)

Advocate for bus riders at OCTA; community activist.

[6. Gayle Jones](#)

Partner and risk and safety manager at Snyder Langston.

[7. Evelyn Gibson](#)



Mentor and advocate for Orange County's foster children.

8. Marilyn J. Harran

Professor of History and Religious Studies at Chapman University; Director of the Rodgers Center for Holocaust Education.

9. Lita Robinow

Irvine public schools activist and fund-raiser.

10. Elizabeth Pearson

Laguna Beach City councilwoman; co-founder of "Kids for Clean Water."

Karen L. Robinson

City of Residence: Costa Mesa

Family: Single; two sisters, one brother (Her father, Phil Robinson, played fullback for Ohio State's 1957 National Championship football team)

What She Does: Mayor of Costa Mesa and chief litigator for the 23-campus California State University system.

Trip she would like to take: Argentina.

With two sisters and a brother ahead of her, Karen Robinson was the baby of the family. Her mother knew she would grow up to be either a lawyer or an actress. As the youngest in the family, Karen says, "I understood that to get attention you have to make your case. I knew how to deliver my lines."

As the chief litigator for the Cal State University system and as the mayor of Costa Mesa, that is what Robinson does. She is articulate, excelling at presenting the facts in the courtroom and to constituents. The graduate of UCLA (B.A. and J.D) and longtime resident of Anaheim moved to the Mesa Verde section of Costa Mesa in 1998 because the big yards and friendly neighbors reminded her of growing up in Louisville, Ky. At the time, the neighborhood homeowners association was dealing with a case of attempted rape and when they heard Robinson speak, people asked her to join the board.

Later, news of a 144-home development nearby galvanized neighbors to organize. Robinson and others worked with the developer and the city to reduce the numbers to 69 homes. "It's a beautiful project now," says the mayor. After this experience, Robinson decided to run for City Council. "I thought it was important that there be a community voice on the board."

In an 11-person field (including two incumbents) for three seats, Robinson edged out one of the incumbents by 32 votes. Robinson credits two friends, Cindy Brenneman and Robin Leffler, for her success. "None of us had ever run a campaign. Our budget was only \$4,800," she says. "I thank the community for believing in me and taking a chance on a newcomer."

In office, Robinson says she has worked to increase the amount of notice the community has about development projects and is proud that the city cut \$1 million from its budget last year. "We could see the state budget crisis building and we needed to anticipate. I am really proud of the department heads." She says the city is working to improve the westside. "We have a long ways to go but the wheels are in motion." She also aims to attract more high-tech business to the city, saying the city is business-friendly and that new campus-style office space will soon be available along the 405 Freeway next to Fairview Road.

The combination of charm, grace, level-headedness, intelligence and cheerleader enthusiasm that helped propel Robinson to leadership in Costa Mesa has been on display before. When she was 13, her family moved to San Jose when General Electric Co. transferred her father to California. Suddenly, she and her sister were 2 of 6 African-Americans in a student body of 2,000. She laughs, "We took the school by storm. We assimilated. I was student body president by senior year." She was also a track star in the 100-meter hurdles.

"My coach told me I could be a big fish at a small pond but at the big schools there would be stiff competition." Robinson was recruited by UCLA and joined a track team that included future Olympians Jackie Joyner Kersey and Florence Griffith. It was a thrilling yet humbling experience. Robinson says it taught her that in every field of endeavor there are always going to be people with more talent and skill. She loved sports but it wasn't her end goal. "I knew I wanted to be an attorney and a litigator. Perry Mason, that's what I wanted to do." She majored in political science, left the track team after two years to become a cheerleader and then homecoming queen before going on to UCLA law school.

At the Long Beach law firm Keesal, Young and Logan, Robinson represented private shipping lines, securities firms and a full range of business litigation. In 1996, she changed gears by joining the counsels' office of the CSU system. "I didn't have any public entity experience so I was thrilled they hired me." In 1999, she became the head litigator for the CSU system. She says the issues are similar to those that face a city - construction contracts, employment issues, collective bargaining - as well as things unique to a university - tenure issues, intellectual property questions, entertainment on campus and First Amendment questions.

The Klansman David Duke was invited to campus to speak about Prop. 209 and some students wanted a temporary restraining order to prevent him from speaking. Robinson argued the university's position. "I had to defend David Duke's, a Klansman, right to speak." As a lawyer, Robinson says that the case did not bother her. "It was a straight First Amendment case. He had a right to speak. Lawyers fit the facts to a set of laws. Hopefully, the system allows the proper result."

Having traveled to other countries, Robinson says Americans can be proud of their judicial system. For example, when she traveled to South Africa in 1999 she discovered that two trial courts could rule differently about the same type of case and that there was no appellate court to decide what the proper verdict should be.

At some point, Robinson would like to don judicial robes. "I would like to be part of the system in another capacity. As a litigator I am an advocate for one party in a dispute. A judge sees both sides. Knowing who I am, I believe I could be impartial and fair. I believe I could treat people with dignity and respect and help people understand and believe in the system. It's better than others."



- By Kevin O'Leary

Christine Diemer Iger

City of Residence: Newport Beach

Family: Husband, Robert Iger

What She Does: Partner at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips LLP and the new Chairwoman of the Orange County Business Council.

Trip She Would Like to Take: "Right now, I'm quite happy with our house in Newport Beach and our house in the desert (Indian Wells)."

Christine Diemer Iger gazes out the window of a 12th story law firm conference room in the copper-toned Center Tower next to the Orange County Performing Arts Center in Costa Mesa.

"Look out and you can see it all. Close to us you can see potential pockets of urban infill and questions of traffic such as stoplights and freeway offramps."

Looking south to the hills of Irvine and Laguna she sees questions of open space and hillside ordinances. "It is possible to build on top of the ridges. It is a question of what the community wants. Look at San Francisco. There are lots of houses on hillsides." And as she looks out toward the Pacific she thinks about urban runoff issues.

"There is no one right or wrong way to develop an area. Consensus is usually the right way to go. Of course, it's up to the client. We'll represent the position they want to take."

An attorney who specializes in land development, Iger headed the Building Industry Association for 12 years. The powerful trade association represents developers and builders and works with local, state and federal officials on land-use issues. Before that she worked in Gov. George Deukmejian's administration, first as deputy secretary of business, transportation and housing and then as director of housing.

Today she is a partner at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips LLP, a Los Angeles-based law firm famous for its political connections and effectiveness as a lobbyist in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. Founding partner Chuck Manatt, an expert on banking regulations, is a former chair of the Democratic National Committee. Former Sen. John Tunney and Clinton Administration trade representative Mickey Kantor have been partners. Wanting to open an Orange County office, the firm approached Iger to become their land-use specialist and brought in former GOP Assembly leader Scott Baugh to help with lobbying in Sacramento. Founding partner Tom Phelps, an expert on financial institutions, helps direct the office.

Iger says the firm has a competitive advantage vs. other law firms because it has offices in both Sacramento and Washington, D.C. "That's rare in the legal world." Iger goes on to explain why a law firm such as Manatt is effective. "In my world I deal more with regulators and politicians than the courts. It's a different strategy. Yes, we can sue and win in court but it is often quicker to try and resolve an issue with the city council or planning commission or regulators. You don't want to rush to court. It's expensive."

The issues facing developers and builders range from schools, building fees, environmental

regulations such as the California Environmental Quality Act that cover wetlands, water quality and toxic waste to infrastructure needs that involve water and sewage systems and traffic plans. Developers don't get the green light on projects until they get approval on these issues.

Iger says she enjoys being a practicing attorney again. After San Diego State and Western State Law School, she clerked for a federal judge and worked on immigration and drug cases. She was hired by then Attorney General Deukmejian as a deputy state attorney and trained prosecutors on search-and-seizure procedures and argued cases on the appellate level and one case before the state Supreme Court before following Deukmejian to the executive branch. Her most daunting challenge while in Sacramento: managing the Century Freeway housing progra. It involved building new housing while the freeway was being built, relocating 3,000 people and working with all the cities involved as well as state and federal officials.



With her wealth of experience, Iger recently became the first woman to chair the Orange County Business Council (OCBC). She says the board's goals include coming up with a workable plan to relieve congestion on the 91 Freeway between Orange and Riverside counties. "Our business community is meeting with theirs to help the two transportation authorities" come up with a solution to relieve congestion. On another front, she says OCBC will have "a voice at the table" in the state budget crisis.

Iger has a special interest in helping UC Irvine and Chapman University maintain cutting-edge business curriculums and she is working with Orange County Department of Education to develop a program to help high school teachers enhance their knowledge of the business world by visiting local companies such as Boeing, Broadcom and Conexant. It's not just students who should go on field trips. "Teachers are hungry for real-life experience."

On top of everything else, Iger serves on two public boards - The Keith Companies, the local engineering firm, and Sunwest Bank. She says that in the post-Enron world there are a lot more disclosures and documentation. She says it will be interesting to see whether the new corporate governance structure "helps or hinders the entrepreneurial spirit."

- By Kevin O'Leary

Margarita Silva

City of Residence: Tustin

Family: Husband, Aaron Silva; two sons, Daniel, 7, Benjamin, 5

What She Does: Associate Professor of Education, Concordia University.

Trip She Would Like to Take: London. "The boys want to see Big Ben."

Norma Hernandez

City of Residence: Irvine (Concordia University)

Family: Husband, Anthony Hernandez

What She Does: Assistant Professor of Human Development and Psychology, Concordia University.

Trip She Would Like to Take: Italy

The Jimenez sisters, Margarita and Norma, grew up as children of Mexican immigrants in San Fernando and Sylmar. Today they are on the faculty of Concordia University.

How this came to be is a story of persistence, hard work, big dreams and talent. What makes these two sisters special is that they are part of that 1 percent of American academics who are Latino, that they earned their doctorates in education at Harvard University and that they returned to their alma mater to train future teachers and undergraduates how to deal with an increasing ethnically diverse culture.

Thinking about and talking about ethnic identity and stereotypes can be a complicated and emotionally charged occupation. When Norma arrived on campus this year she agreed to teach a course Margarita had been teaching titled: "Cross Cultural Perspectives in Education." Margarita says, "I gave her the syllabus, the textbooks but I forgot to tell her how to present this. It is second nature to me now that you have to ease into the subject matter."

There are a bundle of stereotypes that a teacher has to get past in order to have an honest dialogue about ethnicity, race and class in American culture. Margarita says, "If you come in as a minority to talk about the minority experience, Anglos will often assume you have a chip on your shoulder. The purpose is not to make the Anglo students feel white guilt. The key is to create an environment where people feel safe." Norma says, "It's important not to be heavy handed. In teaching, there is a delicate balance between challenging students and turning them off."

As a youngster, Margarita endured the taunts of her classmates about her deformed hand. She had surgery from the age of 3 months to the third grade. "The kids were cruel," she says. Then forced busing in the Los Angeles Unified School District sent her to Northridge, where Anglo teachers had low expectations of the new kids in school - predominately Latino and African-American. "At the end of sixth grade I told my parents I wanted to drop out. I was serious.

"We were raised Catholic but all the Catholic schools had two-year waiting lists. But around the corner there was a small Lutheran school. We were impressed by the politeness of the staff and the academics. The churches looked the same to us. We didn't really notice the contrast (in religious iconography) between the crucifixion and Jesus with the lamb."

The Lutheran school also had a waiting list but every day during that summer Margarita made sure she stopped by the school to ask if she was in. When the fall semester began, she was in class. "Lutheran education changed my life. They had very high expectations and they never let me use my birth defect as an excuse. It was the first time I felt affirmed by someone besides my parents."

To help pay the tuition, Margarita and Norma (her younger sister by two years) worked as janitors in the afternoons cleaning bathrooms and chalkboards. Later they worked at the flea market.

"It's not something you want to do the rest of your life," says Norma. "You can work with

your hands or work with your head."

As intellectuals, both sisters are focused on the Latino educational experience. "One of the problems I have with the academic literature on Latino students is that it mostly focuses on failure," says Norma. For her dissertation she conducted a longitudinal study of adolescents of Mexican descent, exploring the effects of gender, generational status, and ethnic identity on academic achievement. Studying low-income students in a predominantly Latino school, she wanted to find out who did well and why.

The sisters say academic achievement is a complicated psychological subject in Latino culture. It's not so much a fear of success as it is a fear that academic success will cause other Latinos to see you as selling out to the dominant Anglo culture. Norma says, "Some students will intentionally underperform because they don't want to be identified as selling out." She says the slang is 'Getting above your raisin' - trying to be better than you are - and 'Being down with Brown.'

The focus of their professional lives is helping Latino students move back and forth between their ethnic world and the dominant culture. "You have to be able to straddle both worlds," says Norma. "You learn when to hold on to your roots and when to play by the rules." Michael Walzer deftly explores this issue across ethnic groups in "What it Means to Be an American."

In an aside that could be taken from "My Big Fat Greek (Latino) Wedding," Margarita says it's a big issue in her family whether her husband is "really Latino." The UC Berkeley Boalt Hall-trained attorney is Mexican on his father's side and German on his mother's side.

While Norma is more focused on research, Margarita's love is teaching teachers and helping them prepare for the multi-ethnic world that is today's classroom. She returned to Concordia because she is more interested in teaching than in the publish-or-perish world of research universities. She was recently named California's Teacher Educator of the Year. For her doctoral research she examined the effects of Proposition 227, the initiative that dismantled bilingual education in California in 1998. She looked at the initiative's effects on first-grade teachers in a school that was overwhelmingly Mexican-American.



Both sisters are very interested in helping Orange County students prepare for college. They say that many high schools serving largely Latino populations do not offer the college prep classes necessary for entrance to the University of California and the more selective private colleges. At Century High School in Santa Ana, Margarita and Norma are involved with a future teachers program that begins in the 10th grade and Concordia University is now offering two scholarships to those students.

Margarita's advice to parents: "Parents really need to pay attention during middle school." This sister act wants kids to stay on track and aim high.

- By Kevin O'Leary

Jane Reifer

City of Residence: Fullerton

Family: Single

What she does: Community activist, customer advocate at OCTA.

Trip She would like to take: "I'd like to go from North Orange County to South Orange County in an hour on a bus."

Growing up in Garden Grove in the 1970s, Jane Reifer was struck by how land was being eaten up by automobiles. Streets were constantly widened, gas stations built and parking lots paved. Early on, she decided not to participate in Orange County's car culture with its attendant problems of overdevelopment and traffic jams.

"I've never had a driver's license," Reifer says. "I rely on public transportation to conduct my business and travel wherever I need to go. It can be done." An efficiency expert who helps people deal with clutter in their personal and business lives, Reifer travels to one or two appointments across the county each day.

Years of using public transportation gave Reifer insight into bus system problems and a desire to see those problems remedied, but she didn't get involved until early 2000 when the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), the agency in charge of the buses, decided to restructure the system.

"I thought their plan was a tragedy for bus riders," Reifer says. "So I got together with a group of concerned bus riders and founded Transit Advocates of Orange County (TAOC) to fight the plan."

OCTA's plan was to go from a radial system, in which bus routes emanated from transportation centers, following L- and Z-shaped routes that connected popular destinations, to a grid system in which each major street is served by its own set of buses that travel only on that street.

"Intuitively, straight-lining seems to make sense," Reifer says. "It saved OCTA a ton of money by reducing vehicle service hours. And it is simpler to understand. But it adds tremendously to riders' travel time. Riders who used to have to transfer once to get where they were going, now have to transfer two or three or even four times. And they have to transfer on street corners where it is wet when it is raining and hot in the summer instead of in protected transportation centers."

TAOC wasn't able to stop the straight-line plan, but they did get OCTA's attention when they planned a protest to coincide with the agency's board meeting.

"They invited us in to talk," Reifer says. "And we were able to get them to remedy some of the worst problems caused by the new system - routes that were just leaving people stranded for hours." But it was slow going.

Then, in January 2001, OCTA hired a new CEO, Art Leahy, who had a background in mass transit instead of highways.

"He gets it," Reifer says. "One of the real problems with getting good mass transit in Orange County is that - because it's such a car-oriented culture - most of the people overseeing the bus system have never ridden on buses and don't understand the kind of problems riders face."

Leahy decided to turn a negative into a positive by bringing OCTA's chief critic into the organization to give some official input into how to improve the bus system. "They hired me in April 2002 as a customer advocate, to give direction for policy that would serve their customers," Reifer says.

Reifer and TAOC have helped bring about a number of changes: The worst routes have been corrected; train schedules have been included in bus schedule books so that riders can coordinate their use of both types of transit; extensive errors in the schedule have been corrected; and transit users who attend OCTA meetings are now given bus passes instead of parking validation. In the near future, bus arrival times will be posted at each stop so that riders will know not just the bus number and days the bus runs but exactly how long they will have to wait.

"That is going to be an incredible service improvement," Reifer says. "It is so frustrating for people to be waiting for a bus with no idea when it will arrive. Now, if the bus isn't coming for 20 minutes, riders can go get a Coke or walk part of the way to their destination along the route."

Reifer believes a paradigm shift is taking place at OCTA. She says that, in the past, increased operational efficiency was the main motive for changes in the bus system. Now, the agency is beginning to think in terms of improved customer experience as well.

Reifer's contract with OCTA ran out in early March, but she continues to push for system improvements. She has plans to put together a transit users guide giving tips to the uninitiated on how to combine buses, trains and taxis into an efficient, economical system of transport. She also is shopping around the idea of a state law mandating that adjacent transportation districts have to change their schedules on the same day or days each year so that riders going from Orange County to Los Angeles or Riverside don't end up with one schedule that is current and another that is out of date - what she calls a ghost schedule.

"I've always said that Orange County has a bus system that is 70 percent there," Reifer says. "The buses go to a lot of places and they are much nicer than the buses in Los Angeles. They are clean and the temperature control is good. For the most part the drivers are wonderful. But there is no reason the system can't be 90 or 95 percent there."

Orange County began bus service in 1972. In 2002, OCTA operated 625 buses on 79 routes carrying a total of 62 million passengers. It is the fastest-growing bus system in the nation.

Reifer also is involved in Rail Advocates of Orange County, an organization that works to support expanded and improved rail service, and is chair of the Fullerton Historic Theater Foundation, a group working to preserve and restore the Fox Fullerton Theater, which contains a wealth of ornamental richness and architectural significance and is one of



the last remaining vintage vaudeville house/movie theaters in Orange County.

- By Steve Thomas

Gayle Jones

City of residence: Corona del Mar

Family: Husband, Roy

What she does: Partner and Risk and Safety Manager at Irvine-based Snyder Langston construction firm.

Trip she would like to take: I already took the trip I would like to take and that was to Uganda last year with friends to visit the gorillas. And this year my husband and I, and friends, are going back to Southern Africa.

Honesty, loyalty and hard work - time-honored character traits that sometimes go by the wayside in today's business world - have earned Gayle Jones national and local accolades for her contributions in the construction industry.

Most recently, she was honored with the Elizabeth Dole Glass Ceiling Award at the annual American Red Cross Clara Barton Spectrum Awards ceremony. The award recognizes a woman who has overcome obstacles in the corporate environment, breaking through barriers that stood in the way, and improving the quality of life in Orange County.

"I live in basically what people would think as a man's world," says Jones. "The obstacles are generic, quite frankly. I don't feel I've had any more challenges than anyone else in this business.

"I like what I do. I like challenges. And I've been afforded and lucky to have both all these years."

Jones joined Snyder Langston in 1961, two years after its formation, as a receptionist and bookkeeper. Within three years, she was named a partner at the Irvine-based construction firm, which has headed numerous major building projects including South Coast Repertory, the Irvine Spectrum shopping/entertainment center, CBS Studios and St. Joseph Hospital. Though she has served in a number of capacities during her 42-year career, she is most noted for her work in the area of safety and risk management.

"The safety aspect is the most rewarding because there's feedback," she says. "You can gauge if you're successful or not."

The Corona del Mar resident has been responsible for the development of site-specific risk analysis and operation of the subcontractor pre-qualification and tracking system, with a specific focus on safety education and compliance, for more than 10 years. Her many efforts include implementing and overseeing measures to avoid on-the-job injuries resulting from falls as well as financial catastrophes that can result when subcontractors fail to perform quality work or miss deadlines. The South Coast Repertory project, for perspective, required approximately 50 subcontractor trades.

"The construction business is very collaborative," says Jones. "We have to have a

partnership and good relationship with the owner, the architect, engineer, the building department, subcontractors and then our team ... It's a people business, not just brick and mortar."

The 63-year-old's most recognized work in the industry is in the prevention of crane tragedies. Profiled in Janine Reid's book, "Saving Lives: Proven Methods to Eliminate Job-Site Fatalities," Jones is responsible for developing a crane survey checklist. Refined over the years with the help of crane experts, survey items include operator qualifications, load-to-capacity ratio, maximum wind speeds and more. The survey won Snyder Langston the International Risk Management Institute's first Best Practices Award.

This month, she will see the fruits of a five-year effort with the passage of a regulation requiring the certification of all Southern California crane operators. The ordinance requires crane operators to pass a physical, drug test, and a written and practical exam before they can operate a crane.



"It's a nice going-away present," says Jones, who is passing the baton to another risk manager. She now serves as adviser to the well-respected firm, which she helped build from its earliest beginnings.

- By *Sandy Bennett*

Evelyn Gibson

City of residence: Long Beach

Family: Single; two sisters

What she does: Mentor-advocate and board member for the Orange County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) in Orange.

Trip she would like to take: I always love going to Israel ... I would always go back there again.

Every year hundreds of Orange County children are removed from their home because of abuse, neglect or abandonment. Though free from the harmful hands of unfit parents, their new, unfamiliar world in foster care is disorienting and often brings much fear and confusion.

Evelyn Gibson has guided a number of these children through the foster care system, becoming not only their voice, but also many times their dearest friend.

The Long Beach resident, who previously lived in Orange County and works full time as vice president of communications at Ambassador Advertising Agency in Fullerton, has been a volunteer at Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Orange County for 13 years. The first volunteer for the nonprofit agency's Child Abuse Services Team, she has assisted more than 30 sexually abused children and teens. She also serves on the organization's board of directors.

Her dedication to community service, she says, comes from her mother, who continuously lent a helping hand to neighbors and community members and was named Woman of the Year by her hometown city in Michigan,

"It wasn't a matter for me whether or not I would volunteer," says Gibson. "It was what I'd be doing.

"My own commitment in this phase of my life, which began about 10 years ago, is to devote my personal time to children and their needs. Abused children are the ultimate victims. They need someone to be their voice."



As a mentor-advocate for CASA, Gibson speaks on behalf of these youths in court and makes sure their educational, medical, emotional and physical needs are met. Her efforts, though, go far beyond advocacy. For many of these children, she is the only consistent adult figure in their life.

Gibson, who has worked with as many as three children at one time, also meets with each child on a weekly basis. Besides answering their questions and keeping them informed, moments of fun are shared. A trip to Downtown Disney or a local museum represents a couple of adventures. She also keeps a scrapbook filled with mementos for them, helps with their homework and attends school programs. Gibson, for example, was the only one who showed up for one of her teen's high school graduation ceremony. While the average time commitment per child typically averages 18-24 months, Gibson served as a mentor-advocate for this particular girl for 10 years.

Though her efforts at CASA are extensive, requiring anywhere from six to 20 hours each week in addition to her responsibilities as a board member, this represents only one area of service. Gibson, who began volunteering when she was in junior high, also is an active member of Grace Community Church in Seal Beach where she sings in the choir, serves on the church leadership council, is chairwoman of the Communications Committee and participates as a member of the Project Management Team for the new building expansion. She also has been involved in an array of other projects outside her church.

At an age when many begin to think about retiring, there's no slowing in sight for the 62-year-old, who loves adrenaline-pumping activities such as sky diving and jet skiing.

"I feel very strongly about this; and the older I get the stronger I feel about it," she says. "I don't want to die rested. I want to be completely worn out and pooped."

- By Sandy Bennett

Marilyn J. Harran

City of Residence: Santa Ana

Family: Single

What she does: Professor of History and Religious Studies at Chapman University; Director, The Rogers Center for Holocaust Education.

Trip she would like to take: Take students to Berlin and Prague to see some of the

historical sites she teaches them about.

Marilyn Harran says she teaches Holocaust studies because she wants students to grasp the fact that "ordinary people can make a difference in the world." For good or evil.

In Nazi Germany and the countries Germany occupied in World War II, ordinary people persecuted and killed Jews, Gypsies, Catholic clergy, mentally and physically handicapped people and others Hitler declared unfit to live in his glorious Reich. Other ordinary people did not kill but did not protest either, acquiescing to the nightmare. And then there were the "ordinary" people who risked their lives to save others from the Nazi terror, an angelic minority whose faces in old photos remain radiant all these many years later, shining with a spiritual light in the darkness of history.

Harran wants her Chapman University students and students in 50 area high schools and middle schools who participate in an annual Holocaust writing contest to be thrilled and inspired by the rescuers, to wake up to their own personal power to do good, to have courage and take action, in spite of evil. And she wants them to remember the other ordinary people, too. The blameless victims, the terrible executioners and the glum majority who kept their heads down and their hearts closed and let hell emerge around them.

Harran, Stern Chair in Holocaust Education and director of the Rogers Center for Holocaust Education, has taught at Chapman since 1985. She began her academic career as a student of Luther and the Reformation. A fine example herself of how one person can make a difference in the world, she created the first Holocaust studies course at Chapman in 1994: "Germany and the Holocaust: From Anti-Semitism to the Final Solution." Since then the program has grown in amazing ways. In addition to the center she directs and the chair she holds, the program now includes three college courses, three lecture series that bring the world's foremost Holocaust experts to Orange County, and the annual writing contest. In the near future, Harran expects to add a fourth course and offer a minor in Holocaust studies. When Chapman's new library opens in 2004-'05 it will contain the Holocaust Memorial Library and Institute.

"None of this existed five years ago," Harran says. "It only came about because of the wonderful support and leadership of our president Jim Doti and people like Phyllis and Barry Rodgers, who gave the endowment to establish the Rodgers Center, and Sue and Ralph Stern who endowed the Stern Chair, a faculty position that honors the 1.5 million Jewish children who perished in the Holocaust."

The annual writing contest is at the core of Harran's mission. Students in participating schools write a story, essay or poem in response to a prompt: This year they were asked to write about a community of conscience from the time of the Holocaust. Each school submits the work of two student finalists. Entries are judged by a distinguished panel and prizes awarded at a ceremony attended by students, teachers and members of The 1939 Club, an organization of Holocaust survivors that has formed a strong relationship with the Rodgers Center. The club supports one of the center's lecture series and members interact with students in a variety of ways.

"Each finalist receives a copy of 'The Holocaust Chronicles,' Harran says. "After the awards ceremony there will be an opportunity for them to have their books signed by members of the club. That will become a kind of living history. The survivors are in the last years of their lives. Soon they all will be gone. But the students will have met them and will have documentary evidence of their lives to carry forward with them, becoming witnesses to the



future.

"It is so inspirational to meet the survivors who came here after losing their homes and families and started over, to see how full of joy and humanity they are. We can learn so much from them about the meaning of humanity and courage.

"I am not Jewish and I have always felt strongly that the Holocaust is not just a Jewish issue. It is a human issue. How could it have happened in a civilized European country? How can we be sure that it will never happen again?"

Harran credits Jan Osborn, a lecturer in Chapman's schools of education and communication, with much of the writing contest's success. "She has really been the

driving force."

She also singles out her assistant Jessica Cioffi for praise. "We really are a team and I am in the limelight only because I am surrounded by wonderful people who make me and the Rodgers Center look good."

- *By Steve Thomas*

Lita Robinow

City of Residence: Irvine

Family: Husband, OC METRO Editor Kevin O'Leary; two daughters, Allison, 16, Rebecca, 12

What She Does: Food broker and education activist/fund-raiser.

Trip she would like to take: Greece, Italy and Switzerland.

In a year when the state budget crisis is wreaking havoc on local school budgets across the state, Orange County parents wondering what they can do to save programs and teachers can draw inspiration from a fund-raising drive that took place last year in Irvine.

Lita Robinow was named Parent Volunteer of the Year by the Irvine Unified School District (IUSD) in 2002 for spearheading a grassroots effort that raised nearly \$900,000 to stave off cuts in elementary school teaching staffs and preserve class-size reduction. As a parent of two public schoolchildren, Robinow had been involved with the schools since day one, serving as president of the local PTA and working on the Measure A parcel tax campaign. The April 2000 measure would have raised millions for the Irvine schools and was supported by 64 percent of the voters. Yet it fell short of the two-thirds supermajority required for passage.

When Irvine Unified announced \$5.2 million in cuts for the 2002-2003 school year, Robinow went into high gear. "The district has been cutting for years, but they have always kept the cuts away from the classroom," she says. "They cut staff, they cut administration and they cut maintenance. This time it was going to mean the loss of more than 100 elementary school teachers."

Within a few days of the January 2002 announcement, Robinow composed and began to circulate an e-mail fund-raising letter. Working with two friends, Teresa Bachelor and Loucinda Carlson, she formed an ad hoc group called Irvine Embraces Education (IEE) to receive donations. Money started rolling in.

"We knew that almost two-thirds of voters wanted to give money to the schools, because they voted to pay a \$95-a-year parcel tax," Robinow says. "We gave them the opportunity to contribute."

Formerly a professional fund-raiser who worked for then California State Assemblyman Mel Levine and for U.S. Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.), raising \$1 million for his 1986 re-election campaign, Robinow knew the buttons to push and steps to go through.

"I knew we needed a nonprofit to give the money to. So we negotiated an arrangement with the Irvine Public Schools Foundation. They didn't know exactly what we were up to, but they took us under their wing and the school district agreed to accept the money if it came through the foundation."

Robinow's next stop was City Hall where the mayor and city manager agreed to match the first \$100,000 raised by IEE. With \$60,000 in hand, Robinow and company held a successful fund-raiser that pushed them over the top.

"We decided to try and break the Guinness Book record for the biggest group hug - playing off the idea of embrace. We had a great event at City Hall at which the mayor and superintendent of schools spoke. We had booths and music and 1,500 people in the group hug."

With \$110,000 from donors, \$100,000 from the city of Irvine and a generous \$50,000 from a local business, Maruchan Inc. (the maker of Ramen Noodle Soup), IEE had a good start and a long way to go to raise the \$860,000 needed to keep the elementary school teachers on the job.

"A father came forward at that point with the idea for a pledge drive conducted through the elementary schools," Robinow says. "Every school got a pledge kit with pledge forms that were sent out to all the parents of children in kindergarten, first grade and second grade, since they were the students that would have been affected by the cuts." That effort raised \$335,000 in pledges, bringing IEE's total to nearly \$600,000. At that point the Irvine Public Schools Foundation's board voted to provide the final \$260,000-plus needed to save the teachers' jobs.

"The most gratifying thing to me was being able to do something that really made a difference and mattered to so many people," Robinow says. "People move to Irvine for the schools and even people without kids get the benefits of great schools in the form of a safe community with high property values. It made me feel wonderful to do something that helped the whole community."

Robinow is now a member of the board of directors of the Irvine Public Schools Foundation and her fund-raising effort has been institutionalized. "I am the chair of the pledge drive this year," she says. "So far we have raised \$334,000 in pledges to save elementary school teacher jobs and keep class sizes from increasing.

"The situation with the Irvine schools is again dire. It looks like there may be \$7.5 million



in cuts this year. So we need all the help we can get."

Part of the long-term solution, says Robinow, is for the state to begin sending IUSD the same amount of money per student that other Orange County districts receive. Long labeled a "rural district" by state officials, IUSD has consistently received approximately \$100 less per student compared to other local districts. The governor finally signed an equalization bill into law last year but it still has not taken effect. Another reform that would help Irvine and every district in Orange County and the nation is for Congress to fully pay for the mandate of special education. Robinow says the federal government consistently pays only about 19 percent of the cost of special education when the law says the federal government will pay 40 percent of the cost.

Irvine Unified has approximately 24,000 students. Its 2002 budget was \$164 million. The cuts proposed for 2003-2004 would amount to a 4-5 percent reduction, a major blow. Lucky for the kids and teachers there are

people out there like Lita Robinow helping stem the tide.

- *By Steve Thomas and edited by Craig Reem*

Elizabeth Pearson

City of residence: Laguna Beach

Family: Divorced; two beloved dogs, Sophie and Bailey

What she does: Laguna Beach City Councilwoman and Co-Founder of "Kids for Clean Water."

Trip she would like to take: Anywhere rich in history, art and potable water.

Elizabeth Pearson has been charmed by an entire city and its people. Since moving 20 years ago from Cleveland to Laguna Beach, "the most beautiful place in the United States," Pearson has been passionate about improving the quality of life in this idyllic seaside city, a mecca for the arts. She served on the Laguna Beach Planning Commission for nearly seven years, and the Board of Directors of the North Laguna Community Association for 16 years.

This passion for her community turned political when she ran for one of three vacant City Council seats last November - and won - on the platforms for clean water and parking/traffic management, two issues close to the hearts of Laguna Beach residents.

"I started knocking on doors and heard from so many parents how their kids were getting sick from being in the ocean and that we had to do something about cleaning it up," says the newly elected city councilwoman. "It really touched me. Parents said they couldn't take their kids to the beach any more because it was affecting their health."

Now Pearson is tapping into these children for cleaner water, one precious resource helping another. Last year, she and partner Kate Keena founded the organization, "Kids for Clean Water," a community outreach program that proposes to educate children in Orange County's 34 cities about urban runoff and water conservation. So far, Mission Viejo and

Rancho Santa Margarita have signed up.

"If we teach kids good behaviors now, when they're grown, those behaviors will become ingrained, and we'll begin to see real change and progress," Pearson believes. "Hopefully, after we educate kids, they'll pressure parents not to over-water their yards or wash cars in the driveway." The runoff carries oil from the streets into storm drains and ends up in the ocean, killing sealife and making people sick.

Pearson's council work for clean water crosses over into her professional endeavors as president of Adworx, an advertising agency that serves government, financial and nonprofit clients, causes she insists she must believe in herself. She recently teamed up with another agency, Waters & Faubel, and won the county contract for water education.

"I'm most proud of the work I'm doing in clean water. It feels good to go to bed at night feeling like I'm making a difference and getting paid for it. What more could you want?"

This energetic civil servant is also delivering on her campaign promise to streamline traffic in congested Laguna Beach. The council recently approved a village entrance project "that will create a beautiful entryway into our city from Laguna Canyon Road." The project includes a three-level garage enclosing 300 parking spaces, built against the hill on the canyon road just past the Sawdust Festival. It's expected to be completed within the next five years.

"Our problem isn't just parking, it's circulation," Pearson explains. "I'm also proposing a long-term strategy to purchase small parcels of land along PCH for pocket parking, clusters of 75-200 parking spaces in various locations throughout town."

So what is Pearson's long-term vision for Laguna Beach?

"To keep it a pedestrian-friendly city, and have an economic base that is driven by the arts, clean water, strong restaurants and hotels that people like to visit."

As for her political future, Pearson is very content. "I've reached the place I want to be. I can't imagine running for higher office and having to leave Laguna to live in another city half the year."

But it's the "Lagunatics" she loves the most. "They're real and down to earth. They're allowed the freedom to come home on the weekend, and to relax and be casual and enjoy the beach and the arts and the beautiful community we live in. When people move to Laguna Beach, they know they can let their guard down and be who they are."

- *By Lynn Armitage*

**ABOUT CHURM
PUBLISHING**

**OUR OTHER
MAGAZINES**

**WHERE TO
FIND US**

**CONTACT
US**