ZONTA INTERNATIONAL

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ZONTA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

Marian de Forest

Marian de Forest was born on 27 February 1864, in Buffalo, New York. She was the daughter of Sarah Germain de Forest and Cyrus M. de Forest, a prominent businessman and furniture manufacturer in Buffalo.

An eye injury forced Ms. de Forest to begin her schooling with a private tutor. With extraordinary determination and persistence, she overcame this handicap and graduated from Buffalo Seminary in 1884 – the youngest graduate at that time.

Newspaper Career

After graduation, Ms. de Forest began her career as a newspaper reporter – one of the first women in this profession in Western New York. She began reporting with the *Buffalo Evening News* and then with the *Buffalo Commercial*. During the Pan-American Exposition, held in Buffalo in 1901, she served as Executive Secretary of the Board of Women Managers for the Women's pavilion.

Following the exposition, Ms. de Forest joined the staff of the *Buffalo Express*, and served as editor of the Women's Department and dramatic editor for the next 22 years. It was through her work as a drama critic that Ms. de Forest became well acquainted with theatrical celebrities who visited Buffalo. It was also during this time that Ms. de Forest earned national and international fame as a writer and, encouraged by Minnie Maddem Fiske, as a playwright.

Marian de Forest, Playwright

In 1911, Ms. de Forest wrote her first serious play, "Little Women," a dramatization of Louisa May Alcott's famous novel, "Little Women." It was performed for the first time in the Teck Theater in January 1912 – an immediate success – and opened in New York at the Playhouse in October 1912. On 10 November 1919, the play opened at the New Theater in London with Katherine Cornell starring. Ms. de Forest traveled with the company to New York, London and Paris, not only as author, but also as publisher and director. "Little Women" opened again in New York in 1931 and in Buffalo by at least four professional companies, and continues playing today.

Other Cultural Contributions

As the first significant playwright in Buffalo, Ms. de Forest encouraged women to take a prominent role in the theater. She provided Western New York with some of the best dramatic and musical offerings of her time. These offerings included not only the opening nights and long runs of her own popular plays, but the performances of her colleagues and friends: Victor Herbert, Serge Koussivitsky, Ossip Gabrilowitsch, Sarah Bernhardt and Katherine Cornell, to name a few.

In 1924, Ms. de Forest left the Buffalo Express to establish and become manager and executive secretary of the Buffalo Musical Foundation, Inc., where she played a major role in bringing great symphony orchestras and other musical talent to Buffalo. In this role, she worked closely with the School Department of Buffalo to arrange and promote a symphony concert series that

provided more than 3,000 children annually with the opportunity to hear the great orchestras of Boston, Cleveland, Detroit and other cities. She once described one of her greatest ambitions as "the development among children of an appreciation of good music and plays."

In 1932, she promoted the first Pop Concert that gave work to unemployed musicians; and during the early 1930s, she played a major role in the formation of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, introducing to Buffalo some of the most prominent artists of the day.

Civic Leadership

As the world views this extraordinary woman through the lens of history, her accomplishments are even more significant today. Despite her driving commitment as a journalist, playwright and cultural leader, Ms. de Forest was always the personification of civic dedication and volunteerism and was recognized as such in the news media. She served as a member of the board of directors of the Buffalo Public Library, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) and the Humane Society.

Ms. de Forest was also a member of the Buffalo Seminary Graduates Association, the Lyceum Club of London (an exclusive writers' society), the Author's League of America, the Scribblers (a Buffalo women writers' organization), the Dramatists' Club, the Buffalo Athletic Club, the Town Club and an honorary member of the Twentieth Century Club of Buffalo. She was listed in the Notable Women in American Theater and Who's Who in America.

Founder of Zonta International

While working in a prominent role at the Buffalo Express, during a time when women were rarely in leadership positions, Ms. de Forest conceived the idea of an organization that would bring together women in executive positions. Understanding how important it was to break through the "glass ceiling" long before the phrase was ever used, she envisioned a strong network that would help women reach their rightful place in the professions.

On 8 November 1919, Ms. de Forest gathered a group of like-minded women who held prominent roles in the professional world at the Hotel Statler in Buffalo to form the Zonta Club of Buffalo. Zonta was founded as, and continues to be, a service organization of executive women working to improve the legal, political, economic and professional status of women worldwide.

The group chose the name, Zonta, which comes from a Lakota Sioux Indian word that means "honest and trustworthy." In one of her early speeches, Ms. de Forest explained, "Zonta stands for the highest standards in the business and professional world ... seeks cooperation rather than competition and considers the Golden Rule not only good ethics but good business." She envisioned Zonta stretching across the country and beyond. In her own words, "This is the woman's age and in distant lands and foreign climes women of all nations are rallying to the call … Zonta is given the opportunity of uniting them into one great, glorious whole."

Ms. de Forest became president of the Zonta Club of Buffalo, and shortly after, formed and became second president of the Confederation of Zonta Clubs, comprised of nine founding clubs – Buffalo, Rochester, Binghamton, Elmira, Syracuse, Erie, Utica, Ithaca and Detroit. The Confederation later became Zonta International with the incorporation of Toronto in 1927. During the first 15 years of Zonta's existence, Ms. de Forest, as founder and leader with her remarkable vitality and power of persuasion, saw Zonta grow from nine to 124 clubs that were established in the United States, Canada and Europe.

Woman of Peace

An excerpt from a radio address by Ms. de Forest on the occasion of Zonta's 15th Anniversary exemplifies her spirit and charisma. "Far reaching is our plan to assemble in Zonta International the women executives of the world, an army of experts who through friendship, understanding,

cooperation and goodwill, will become an irresistible force of peace." Her contributions through Zonta International have had a lasting impact on women's lives worldwide.

- Achieving for Zonta the distinction of being the first women's service organization to work in partnership with the United Nations since its inception in 1945.
- Obtaining status in the United Nations as a Non-Governmental Organization with representatives in New York, Paris, Geneva and Vienna.
- Securing consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the International Labour Organization and the Council of Europe.
- Contributing millions of US dollars to projects focused on women's health, leadership training and educational and economic development projects in 46 countries, often in partnership with United Nations agencies.
- Providing US$7 million for more than 1,200 Amelia Earhart Fellowships to outstanding women representing 59 countries. Amelia Earhart, a member of the National Women's Hall of Fame, was an active Zontian when her plane disappeared.
- Addressing issues of violence against women and children through the Zonta International Summit On Violence Against Women in 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 and the development of grass root action plans directed at the local and regional level.
- Recognizing leadership potential and commitment to volunteerism through the Young Women in Public Affairs Awards, established in 1990, to encourage women's leadership and careers in public policy, government and volunteer organizations.
- Establishing advocacy-support networking and volunteerism among young women through Golden Z Clubs on college campuses and Z Clubs in high schools.

At age 70, Ms. de Forest died on 17 February 1935, following a long, cancer-related illness. In 1998, she was inducted into the Western New York Women's Hall of Fame. Her nomination was the result of extensive research by members of the Zonta Club of Buffalo. Much of this information was documented in the Zonta archives located at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Throughout her life, Marian de Forest served as a role model for working women. Her impact is still apparent today. She was, indeed, a remarkable woman, a woman among women who inspired, led and made the impossible possible.