Emma L. Conlon leaves legacy of impact

Emma L. Conlon, a retired textile executive and civic leader from New Jersey, served as Zonta International’s president from 1956 to 1958. While in office, she traveled more than 200,000 miles—a remarkable distance as jet passenger service was not yet generally available at the time. During her presidency, Zonta International experienced tremendous growth with the addition of 50 new Zonta clubs.

Prior to serving as international president, Conlon held several local and national offices, including president of the Zonta Club of Paterson Area and governor of District 3. Following her presidency, Conlon focused much of her Zonta work on young people, specifically through Z clubs. She conceived of and funded the Emma L. Conlon Service Awards, established in 1961, to encourage and recognize promising young women. Today, more than 200 awards have been given to Z and Golden Z clubs.

Conlon entered the textile industry at age 20 as a clerical worker and, before her retirement in 1964, rose to become chairman of Colonial Piece Dye Works. In addition, she was a leader in several textile and fabric professional organizations over the years. Her late husband, Frank, was also an executive in the industry. Emma Conlon’s professional interests after World War II ventured into the experimental and futuristic temper of the times: She spoke with enthusiasm of new easy-care fibers that might someday be permeated with breathable medications, disposable travel garments and a future demand for high-grade synthetic furs.

Conlon could claim many “firsts” among her considerable achievements. She was appointed Paterson’s Commissioner of Fire and Police services, the first woman to hold that office in any New Jersey city; first woman board member of the Greater Paterson Chamber of Commerce; and first woman on the Paterson Board of Finance. In 1951, an all-male civic club voted her Paterson’s Outstanding Citizen. In 1954, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower appointed her to the National Board of Field Advisers for the U.S. Small Business Administration. From 1958 to 1960, she traveled and did research for the United Nations as chairman of the Refugee Camp Study Committee. In addition to her Zonta and civic commitments, she gave generously of her energies to charitable enterprises, with emphasis on hospitals and the nursing profession.

Conlon died on 3 August 1995. A Zontian since 1944, she served the organization for more than 50 years. Conlon’s friends, family, and fellow Zontians continue to think of her with fondness and admiration. In 1958, one reporter wrote, “All of her achievements Mrs. Conlon credits to Zonta, where her active public life first started.”