P.E.O. PROGRAM FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION

YESTERDAY AND TODAY--A HISTORY
AN IDEA IS BORN

Early in 1970, members of Chapter AK, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, began to wonder if P.E.O. could give money to women in the United States and Canada to help with education just as was being done for women who come here from foreign countries. They conducted a survey to determine the scholarship needs of women pursuing academic goals at colleges and universities, as well as those attending business and nursing schools, and discovered an overwhelming number of them were having trouble financing their education.

Based on this information, the chapter presented a resolution to the convention of Pennsylvania State Chapter in June 1970 suggesting that P.E.O. consider a scholarship program for women in the United States and Canada similar to the International Peace Scholarship program. The resolution passed and was presented to the executive board of Supreme Chapter.

STUDY COMMITTEE

The executive board had received similar suggestions before; Pennsylvania’s resolution became the catalyst for action. Irene Kerr, president of Supreme Chapter, appointed a special study committee in December 1970 to investigate the feasibility of such a project. The committee was comprised of cochairmen Florence Wallace and Mane Busch of the executive board and members Elizabeth Boyington, Washington; Lilas Brandhorst, Missouri; Lillian Corley, Indiana; Ruth Romero, Pennsylvania; and Helen Storbeck, Kansas.

The first step was to define the greatest educational needs of women in the United States and Canada. A questionnaire was sent to P.E.O’s and educators in both countries. The responses confirmed a great need on the part of mature women for help to obtain or to upgrade marketable skills to meet changing demands in their lives. Suggestions were made to offer a program broader than the traditional scholarship. Such a program would assist with educational expenses such as tuition, books, childcare and transportation for both academic and vocational courses.

The study committee presented a resolution to the 1971 Convention of Supreme Chapter in Detroit, proposing a new continuing education program for P.E.O. The resolution was adopted with the recommendation that the committee be continued during the next biennium to prepare and submit amendments to the Bylaws of Supreme Chapter to implement the program.

PILOT PROGRAM

The study committee instituted a pilot project to award small grants to applicants submitted by chapters throughout the Sisterhood. Based upon results of the study reported to the 1973 Convention of Supreme Chapter in New Orleans, an amendment to the Bylaws was adopted by a wide margin and the Program for Continuing Education (PCE) became P.E.O.’s fourth project. Members of the first board of trustees were Elizabeth Boyington, Lillian Corley, and Ruth Romero.
The first board of trustees soon had a backlog of applications because of limited funds. As chapters became aware of the possibilities for involvement and service, contributions increased until modest grants were possible for almost all eligible applicants.

PCE CELEBRATING TWENTY-FOUR YEARS

The concept of continuing education has changed dramatically since 1973. In the years following the report of President Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women, the mature woman returning to school was a new phenomenon; "Retreading Grandma" made headlines. When a chapter knew of such a woman, it was quite likely she would qualify for a grant. Although it is common today for women to be continuing their education, this fact alone does not mean they will qualify for a PCE grant. For a number of years the amount of contributions supported the awarding of grants to most applicants. When the number of requests grew at a greater rate than the contributions, a policy was adopted in January 1986 to restrict applicants to those women with two years or less remaining to complete their educational goal, thereby limiting the pool of potential applicants. For a few years there were ample funds available. During the mid-nineties the amount of money requested for grants has tripled while the contributions have increased 15 percent during the same period. This imbalance has again necessitated a stricter awarding of grants.

The cost of education has increased dramatically since 1973. In response, the maximum PCE grant has increased by steps from $500 to $750, then to $1,000, reaching the present $1,500 at the beginning of the 1993-1995 biennium. Applications and information required have become more detailed. Trustees consider an applicant’s overall financial situation in making decisions.

One thing that has not changed is the program's emphasis of women helping women to achieve their educational goals. Chapter involvement continues to be crucial. The women most likely to be awarded grants continue to be parents with few or no marketable skills with which to support their families and women who must update their skills to qualify for employment. The financial planning must show that the educational goal is possible with the help of a PCE grant. Women who are single and have no dependents, those who can provide for their education on their own through scholarships or loans, and women doing graduate level work are less likely to receive a PCE grant. However, each application is evaluated on its own merits because each presents a unique situation.

During PCE’s pilot program years, grants totaling $4,979 were awarded; during the 2001-2003 biennium, grants totaling $3,403,049 were awarded. These figures attest to the increasing need for programs such as PCE. Oregon chapters sponsored 59 women for PCE grants totaling $51,937 from April 1, 2003 – March 31, 2004. These remarkable figures would not be possible without the generosity of P.E.O.s.

P.E.O. continues to adapt to changing times. And through PCE women are still helping women. Members of the Sisterhood can take pride in the role the P.E.O. Program for Continuing Education plays in partnership established with the Educational Loan Fund, Cottey Junior College, the International Peace Scholarship Fund, and the Scholar Awards to expand the scope of educational opportunities for women.