

'WE HAVE SO MANY COMPETENT, INTELLIGENT AND...

GLOBAL SWEDES

'... CREATIVE MEMBERS. WE INSPIRE EACH OTHER!'

**Agneta Nilsson**, founder of SWEA, Swedish Women's Education Association and recipient of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor



It started with a small event for 80 people in Los Angeles, where **Agneta Nilsson** sold memberships to her newly established organization SWEA (Swedish Women's Educational Association). Today the global network consists of over 7,000 Swedish speaking women. *Swedish Press* sat down for a chat with the savvy business entrepreneur.

**Please tell us a little bit about your background.**

I attended Schartau Trade and Economic School and the Stockholm School of Economics. In the summer of 1962, at the age of 21, I travelled to New York on a Rotarian Scholarship. Once my year on the East Coast was up, I travelled to California with two Swedish friends. My friend and I ended up starting our own business in Beverly Hills; making bikinis.

They were not allowed on the beaches in CA at this time so we sold them to private people with swimming pools and a couple of boutiques in Beverly Hills and Palm Desert.

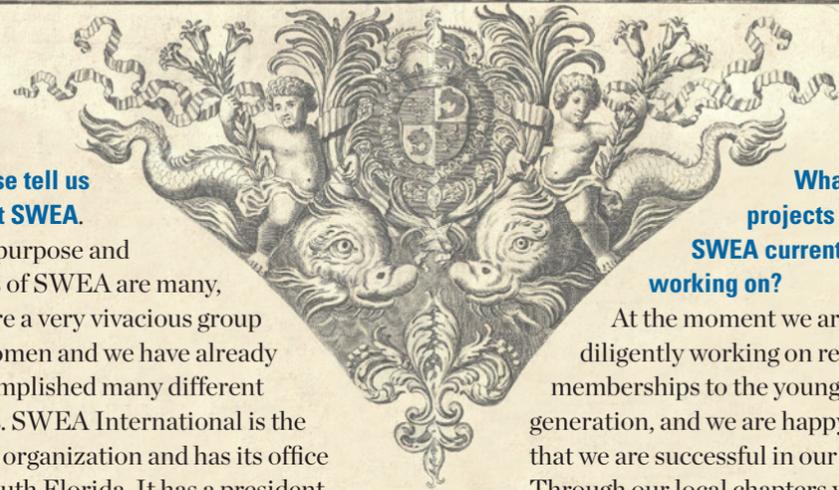
I met my husband, Gunnar Nilsson, in Los Angeles. We got married in Stockholm in 1963 and then returned to LA. As our children grew older I decided to start a group for Swedish women in LA. I was very privileged to be so close to Sweden at all times, much thanks to Gunnar and his work at SAS. I could travel as often as I wanted, I received daily and weekly Swedish papers and we often had guests from Sweden. Even so, I could long for Sweden and Swedish culture. I felt certain that other Swedes felt the same. So little by little, I started saving business cards and addresses from Swedes that I had met.

In 1978 a friend of mine called and asked if we could host a Swedish Christmas Fair. In December of 1978 we held SWEA LA's first Christmas Fair, which became a huge success. I later hosted an event for the people, whose business cards I had gathered. Approximately 80 people showed up and we sold SWEA memberships to most of the women present. That's how SWEA was founded. After that first meeting in 1979 we called for a meeting every month except during the summers. The organization grew and today SWEA can be found in Europe, North America and Asia.

**Please tell us about SWEA.**

The purpose and goals of SWEA are many, we are a very vivacious group of women and we have already accomplished many different goals. SWEA International is the head organization and has its office in South Florida. It has a president, a vice president and seven regional board-presidents (the regions are three in Europe, three in USA and one in Asia). They have an annual meeting and also meet by phone once a month. The Board of Directors all come from different parts of the world. We only have two part-time consultants: administrative manager and office manager, everything else is done by volunteers in the SWEA International as well as in Regional and Local chapters. SWEA International is the main decision maker and they are responsible for:

- Giving out three annual scholarships of 10 000 USD each.
- The Swedish Woman of the year. Presented in Sweden during the annual SWEA Sweden Dinner.
- Organizing the annual SWEA Sweden dinner.
- Organizing the biannual SWEA World meeting. It rotates between Europe, Asia and North America.
- The donation of 250 000 SEK to The Swedish National Museum, to make a film about their treasures while restoring their building.



**What projects are SWEA currently working on?**

At the moment we are diligently working on renewing memberships to the younger generation, and we are happy to say that we are successful in our efforts. Through our local chapters we have the following new events.

- We have added SWEA GLOBAL, which means that if you don't live near a SWEA chapter but want to be part of one, you can still do so through SWEA GLOBAL.
- SWEA Professionals was started a couple of years ago, where mainly the younger generation gets together to visit different companies and have meetings to learn from one another.
- Recently different SWEA chapters have started SWEA CARE, where they make a point of giving helping hands to those SWEA members that are older and have a hard time with, for example driving.

**Who inspires you in your work?**

We have so many competent, intelligent and creative talents within our organization. We inspire each other! Every time I return from a World Meeting, my energy level is at maximum. I think it's the same for most of the participants.

**How does one become a member of SWEA?**

You need to be at least 18 years old and speak good Swedish to become a SWEA member. All of our meetings and lectures are held in Swedish. You can stay with SWEA for as long as you would like. Your membership does not end with you turning 60 or 65, which a lot of other professional organizations do. For more information on becoming a member please see swea.org

**In which areas do you feel Sweden contributes most globally?**

Sweden contributes in a lot of different areas. Swedish women are always admired abroad for their appearance (beauty), straight forwardness, sanity, good sense and fun! We have exported a lot of them, and in SWEA we are happy to have many of them as members!

**How do you think the image of Sweden is changing and developing internationally and particularly in North America?**

Like most countries in Europe, Sweden has taken in a lot of immigrants. This has changed the dynamic of this small, well-managed nation. It happened so quickly and it has taken the country by a not so nice surprise. As I have travelled to Sweden at least 3 times every year for the last 50 years I can really see and feel the difference and sometimes wonder where it all will lead. Americans, who are aware of this, follow the development with

interest, as this is and has been going on for many years in the US.

**How do you think Sweden has achieved the success it has despite being such a small country, population-wise?**

Sweden is such a neat place and it is populated with so many intelligent, people. Just look at the many internet-related inventions Swedish young people have contributed with. The good upbringing we have had in the last century also has a lot to do with where we are today.

**What aspects of Swedish culture and life are you personally most passionate about promoting?**

I love promoting everything Swedish and am very proud of my native country and have always been. If I have to choose one thing I would choose our old and interesting culture and all aspects of it.

**Are there any other current or upcoming projects or events that you would like to mention?**

Every year there are so many things to look forward to. Every summer the members of SWEA put on a greatly appreciated trip to a new "landscape" in Sweden. The trip is 3-4 days and is sold out within one day to 50 members around the world. Needless to say it is very appreciated and popular. This year we are travelling to Borås, exploring everything the city has to offer! 🐾

*Interviewed by Sofie Kinnefors.*