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 Sweden 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.

Who inspires you in your work?
We have so many competent, intelligent and creative members. We inspire each other!

What aspects of Swedish culture do you feel Sweden contributes most globally?
Swedish women are always admired abroad for their 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.