

ALUMNA PROFILE: MARY OAKES SKINNER SMITH '59

FORMER WORLD BANK MANAGER FOCUSES HER EXPERTISE ON EMPOWERING IRAQI WOMEN TO REBUILD A NEW IRAQ

By Arthur Lightbourn

Reprinted by permission from Carmel Valley News (4/21/11).

The way Mary Oakes Smith views the world is this: "There are good people everywhere, you just have to find them and reinforce them."

And that, in fact, is what she has been doing throughout her entire working life—for 30 years as an "on the ground" development project manager with the World Bank in Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa and Iran, and now, in her second career, as the founder and president of the Iraqi Women's Fellowship Foundation (IWFF).

The nonprofit Washington, D.C.-based foundation provides fellowships for Iraqi women, who are currently faculty members or graduate students at universities in Iraq, to advance their studies in engineering and applied sciences, from petroleum to environmental, at U.S. universities so they can return to Iraq as leaders in the rebuilding of their war-torn country.

Smith, 69, is a trim, Katharine Hepburn-style woman with silver-gray hair and light blue eyes who looks as if she would be equally comfortable participating in development conferences in Washington, London and Paris or monitoring the allocation of aid in a construction hut in Brazil's Amazon jungle.

Nowadays, however, her focus is on Iraq—and her personal commitment is to the empowerment of Iraqi women, who were marginalized under Saddam Hussein and suffered through seven years of war and occupation. Smith is working to help them become leaders in the vital fields of engineering and applied sciences as Iraq rises from the ashes of war.

Smith was born Mary Oakes Skinner in Philadelphia. Her father, James M. Skinner Jr., was president of radio-pioneering Philco (originally the Philadelphia Battery Company) Corporation from 1956 to 1961. She described her mother as a "professional volunteer who ... became the head of the Association of Junior Leagues and later

became very much involved with rehabilitation of the handicapped."

After graduating from Smith College in 1963 with a bachelor's degree in political science, Mary Oakes began her career as a trainee in international development at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), where she remained for three years. She married international trade lawyer Harrell Smith in 1966 and, in 1969, joined the World Bank where she remained for 30 years, earning her master's degree in management science from MIT in 1977, and retiring in 1999.



Mary Oakes Skinner Smith '59 (PHOTO: JON CLARK).

"All of this," she said, "was a byproduct of the fact that my parents believed in international travel as a form of education. We, as a family, traveled from the time I was 6 years old every summer. And it just became part of me."

As for her career with the World Bank, she said: "I wouldn't have missed a day of it. I absolutely thrived on it. I loved working overseas, working on the ground in operations, working with people, understanding their needs and trying to figure out the best way forward. And once you've had that kind of association with the World Bank, you don't discontinue it."

The World Bank, created in 1944, headquartered in Washington, D.C., and owned by 186 member countries, provides low-interest loans, interest-free credits and grants to developing countries to reduce poverty through investments in education, health, infrastructure and modernization of a country's financial sector, agriculture and natural resources.

Often, Smith said, World Bank retirees launch foundations or join organizations to continue the work of helping in whatever ways they can.

In 2004-05, while consulting on a U.S. Trade and Development-funded feasibility study for the Women's Information, Communication and Technology Center, she became aware of the plight of Iraqi women. She later led a Women's Learning Network team to UNESCO's conference for the Revitalization of Higher Education in Iraq.