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Revitalizing a Branch: What Other Branches can Learn from our Experience

By Lynn Zalokar, New York Branch 93 Member

It's been almost five years since a small group of New Yorkers, me included, started reorganizing Branch 93 in New York. We've had many successes – increased our membership, created a great Web site and held many events and activities.

But we can also look back and recall not only the successes, but also the past difficulties and ponder the future challenges.

It was December 2001 when I, armed with little knowledge* of and slim connections to Slovenia, attended a holiday party put on by the Slovenian Consulate and Slovenian Business Community. There I met Ervin Hladnik, who said I must meet his wife Mirjam**. She was starting a research project about women of Slovenian descent in the U.S., and as editor of SWUA's New Neighborhood e-newsletter, I was able to direct her to Slovenian-American women. Mirjam and I were soon discussing the idea of a New York SWUA branch.

I found there was a branch in Brooklyn, which was dormant - members were out of state or too elderly to meet. But the eight or nine members provided a framework around which to build. We reorganized as Branch 93-NYC to encompass the entire tri-state area (New York, New Jersey and Connecticut). I got a small list of SWUA members in our area from SWUA National Secretary Bonnie Pohar Prokup.

We invited all, via snail-mail, to our first meeting at a New York City Hungarian restaurant. There was little response. Some members had never been involved with the branch; others belonged long distance to other branches. But Mirjam and I, as well as some other members stuck it out. We soon got a few others to join - from people we met out at social events such as contra dancing, to members who responded to a mailing about us from the Slovenian Consulate. We even got a few SWUA members to transfer over!

We now have access to records from the original branch, so we will be able to research and contact prospective members. In addition, the Slovenian Consulate started including information about our branch in its monthly calendar of events. And we ask SWUA members to let us know when a family member or friend of Slovenian descent moves to the area, no matter what age. Our greatest find has been native Slovenians who are furthering their education at grad school or through doctoral programs, or who are pursuing careers. (Fellow branches; NYC can't be the only place where native Slovenians are pursuing higher education or their career goals. See if there is a way to find Slovenian students at the colleges and universities in your area. Ask your members working at large corporations to check their company's employee directory for Slovenian names too.)

But starting a branch, or in this case, reorganizing, presents some challenges. There may not be enough interest - our first few meetings were held at ethnic restaurants, but soon it became clear they lacked purpose. Our best attended events so far? An afternoon tea for Kulturni Dan (Culture Day) with a presentation on the poet France Preseren and Gregorjevo or Valentino - the Slovenian version of Valentines Day, egg dyeing with plants and onion skins for Easter, a Slovenian wine tasting, our lecture/documentary film series with Mirjam Hladnik and a recent scrapbooking event. Clearly the educational component is important. Members and guests have to walk away feeling like they learned something/participated and that their time was well spent. After all, we compete against everything there is to offer in NYC. For many of us, it's not so much living our legacy as it is learning more about our legacy.

The wonderful diversity of Branch 93 can be a double-edged sword. We have Slovenian-Americans from across the country and native Slovenians (even a Slovenian-Argentinian), but we lack the "old neighborhood" sense of belonging and camaraderie. We didn't grow up in the same places at the same time and it has taken time to get to know one another. Many of our members speak Slovenian fluently and our events give them a chance to speak in their native language. For those of us who don't speak Slovenian, language can be a barrier, but all of our members do speak English.

Many of us are not originally from NYC. So we do share the trials and tribulation of life in the urban/suburban jungle. When we gather we are a unique group with a shared ethnic heritage. Slovenians comprise just a small group in NYC, but we are represented!

We also use our many communication tools to stay connected. In addition to our Web site, which tracks our history and allows prospective members to find us, we have a Yahoo user group and we do an annual mailing - a holiday card with a brief newsletter and our membership list. It's important for members to see the list - a surname may bring about a family connection or fellow members may find they live near each other. (We encourage members to meet each other on their own in addition to attending branch events). Most of us are on e-mail, so it's a challenge to keep those who are not, informed. Some members show support by maintaining their membership, but we encourage all members to come to our meetings and activities.

How do we run our branch? Well, most of us have full-time jobs, so leadership duties are rotated. I served as branch president for more than two years, now we have another president. A change of leadership is refreshing. Our current president has hosted several meetings at her New York apartment, providing us with a central meeting place, and she tackled a grant application that brought Mirjam Hladnik back here for our lecture series. Another member writes branch reports. Others lead events and contribute articles to Zarja-The Dawn.

We now have approximately 48 members and we regularly assess our efforts: Do members attend our events, is membership increasing, are members taking on leadership roles, do we have a presence in Zarja - The Dawn and The New Neighborhood (online newsletter)? This keeps us thinking about future growth.

Of course we extend a warm welcome to all members visiting New York – feel free to attend our events or, with some notice, we can hold an impromptu get-together. Who knows - you may even have ideas to share with us on how we can continue to grow our branch.

To learn more about Branch 93, go to www.swuanyc.org
or contact Sonja Knežević-Kong at sk117@cornell.edu.

* My knowledge of Slovenia and Slovenian-Americans has increased substantially since then, mostly through self-study.

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