

FROM THE GLASS CEILING TO THE WOODEN FLOOR

San Clemente woman is honored for bringing poverty and violence issues to the attention of Orange County's wealthy communities.

BY LAUREN STEUSSY
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

As the saying goes, you never really know someone until you walk a mile in his or her shoes.

The same could be said for baking a cake in his or her kitchen.

It's what Geraldine "Ger-ry" Gerken of San Clemente did as part of her job testing the gas heating power of ovens for the Ohio Fuel Gas Co. in 1950. Serving as the home service director was where she first got her start making friends with all kinds of people in all walks of life, she said.

"I'd cut the cake in half, share half of the cake at the home of whoever lived there, and bring the other half back to the company so they could see how the ovens were working," Gerken said.

The Ohio native moved to Orange County in 1952,

but these days isn't known for baking cakes. Instead she's a voice for under-served youth and victims of human trafficking and domestic violence.

Gerken, 86, is being honored today by the Orange County Human Relations Commission, which hosts an annual award event to honor people who have contributed to human or civil rights efforts in Orange County. The gala to present the award is set for the City National Grove of Anaheim.

Gerken's work helping women and youth in the area began more than 50 years ago when she started working for Zonta International, a club that coordinates services for global women's issues. She was president of both the Santa Ana and Newport Harbor chapters of the club. There, she channeled resources from the club to The Wood- en Floor, a nonprofit that

provides dance training and family services to underserved youth in central Orange County.

The Zonta club, with Gerken's advocacy, has donated almost \$22,000 to The Wooden Floor's programs, according to the nonprofit.

It's not the money that Gerken likes to tell people about, though. Her bright blue eyes light up and she smiles as she talks about the kids she has fallen in love with at the nonprofit. Each year, she donates a Christmas tree and decorates it for the facility on 19th Street and Main Street in Santa Ana. She has already purchased the decorations for this coming Christmas, she said.

One of the issues Gerken will talk to almost anyone about is human trafficking, not just globally, but here in Orange County.

Since 2004, the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force has served roughly 300 victims of trafficking in the county. She seeks out those victims' stories and shares them at her church and at Zonta events.



SAM GANGWER, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Geraldine Gerken gets a kiss from pal Gibson. She's being honored today for her work aiding the disadvantaged.

She hosted one former victim at a recent Zonta convention.

The commission selected

Gerken as an awardee because her work brought issues prevalent to lower-income areas of the county to

wealthier areas where problems like human trafficking aren't as visible, said Don Han, commission spokesman.

"We're always thinking that human trafficking is only something you see in Second and Third World countries," Han said. "In our community, (human trafficking) comes in different forms... And unless someone familiar with that issue comes out and talks about it, we don't know about it. We're behind the orange curtain."

Asked what's driven her lifelong interest in helping other people, Gerken said she's always lived a life of service and volunteered at her church. Throughout her career, she said, she would find any way she could to reach out to those less fortunate, starting with a cooking class she taught to the blind.

"They wanted to learn how to make a rousserie chicken," Gerken said.

"By the time we finished, though, I had never seen so many ways a chicken could be tied up. But they all turned out very well."