

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATES 100 YEARS

Already a long-standing tradition overseas, organizations in the U.S. are increasingly taking up International Women's Day to advance women's rights locally, nationally and around the world.

BY CASSANDRA A. GADDO



When she moved to Chicago after living in Europe for 13 years, Laura Meyer was struck by the disparity between how International Women's Day is recognized in America and abroad.

"In Poland, when I arrived at work on March 8, I had a big bouquet of red tulips on my desk," she says. "I was told, 'It's International Women's Day, don't you know?'" The day, Ms. Meyer says, was used to acknowledge the ways women have contributed to society, with celebrations taking place on a national scale as well as in homes and offices.

But in the U.S., the impact of International Women's Day, which is observed on March 8 and celebrates its centennial this year, is significantly less. To fill the void, Ms. Meyer partnered with WorldChicago Executive Director Peggy Parfenoff to launch a small networking event, drawing 50 people and featuring speaker Anne Roosevelt; International Trade Club of Chicago President Sidney Salvadori joined the cause a few years later. Today, their International Women's Day Fair and Luncheon is celebrating its 10th anniversary, draws over 300 people and is one of the most widely recognized International Women's Day celebrations in Chicago. Vice Chairman and Regional Managing Partner of Deloitte LLP Deborah DeHaas will speak at this year's luncheon on Monday, March 7, about "The Business Case for Diversity: Why Developing Women Leaders is Imperative to the Success of Global Companies."

"There should be an acknowledgment of the day," says Ms. Meyer. "There's value to women's work – whether being paid in an office or at home contributing to the future of society's needs – that needs to be acknowledged. Women go back and forth in these roles at different points in their lives; International Women's Day can contribute

to policies that will help women at all stages of their lives."

FROM REVOLUTIONS TO EMPOWERMENT

Since the United Nations started planning celebrations around International Women's Day, themes have included "Women Uniting for Peace," "Investing in Women and Girls," and the 2011 theme, "Equal Access to Education, Training and Science and Technology: Pathway to Decent Work for Women." But the day's mission of celebrating women's achievements and promoting their advancement in the world go back much further.

The day's prevalence in the former Soviet Union and socialist or communist countries – it's a national holiday in many, including Ukraine, Russia and Bulgaria – results from the holiday's labor movement roots. In the early 1900s, American women began rallying in New York City to demand not only the right to vote, but also shorter hours and better pay. The Socialist Party of America marked the first National Women's Day in 1909; in 1910, the International Conference of Working Women, held in Copenhagen and representing women of unions, socialist parties and working women's clubs from 17 countries, approved the idea of an International Women's Day. For its inaugural celebration in 1911, over 1 million women in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland attended rallies advocating the right to work, vote, be trained, hold public office and end discrimination. Women in Russia used the day to campaign for peace during World War I, linking the day to the Russian Revolution.

In former Soviet Union countries, the day currently serves as a sort of Mother's Day/Valentine's Day honoring all women. Born in Azerbaijan, Shahla Mahmudova recalls fathers, husbands, broth