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William Luers tribute to Gillian Sorensen

Gillian is the prima voce, the bella voce, and indeed the diva of the United Nations. We congratulate her for the decades of brilliantly and convincingly “singing” the story of the UN to the world. The friends of the World Federation of United Nations Associations wisely honor Gillian Sorensen today for extending her voice across this vast nation.

My niece is an opera singer. She sang at the Met and now trains some of the Met’s top voices. From early childhood she had opera bred in her bones but more importantly in her heart and mind. As she studied, concentrated and practiced, the voice grew stronger and more compelling. She just had to sing. There was nothing else that drove her as much as voice. With the years those powerful melodies were emerging ever more from the gut and the heart and not from the larynx and the chest. The power of her voice reflects her determination to excel and her willingness to devote her life to music.

So it is with Gillian who is probably one of the worlds most practiced, most concentrated, most talented, and most long performing voices on behalf of the United Nations. She is like many in this room a delightful friend, smart colleague, and professional talent. Yet when Gillian stands before an audience she is transformed into the diva of the UN -- that unmatched and persuasive voice. The voice she has developed is clear, passionate, informed and powerful. And like my niece her voice now emerges from her gut and her heart.

Like in the opera, the words are not nearly as important as the voice, the presentation, the professional preparation and the impact the singer has on an audience. While her arguments are always compelling, it is her demeanor, her positive and uplifting energy, and the smile on her face that give her speeches such a compelling message to any audience. She understands that in most speeches and performances, over 70% of the impact is from the non-verbal aspect of the presentation. It is not so much what she is saying but the credibility she has, the style of her delivery, the passion of her belief and the professional preparation she has made. She is a phenomenon.

I have been part of her enormous and admiring audience for decades and marveled at the presence and convincing presentations she has perfected. On several occasions I have asked her for advice, some of the words and persuasive arguments and metaphors she employs. I have tried to emulate her message, but I quite candidly am not a prima voce or a diva in this UN opera.

You have all heard and know of Gillian's long experience with the United Nations working with the Koch administration from the side of the City, with two Secretaries General inside the UN and most recently as the traveling star persuader for the UN Foundation and for the United Nations Association. She has spoken before more chapters of UNA-USA than any leader of the organization and she is usually the number one pick as UNA-USA chapters and other groups seek a spokesperson for the UN.

I do not mean to give the impression that Gillian is "simply a performer" who tells stories persuasively. I love the theater and admire the acting profession. Gillian's performances carry a message far beyond entertainment. The United Nations has a special need in the United States for a believable and ubiquitous advocate. Gillian is that most traveled and best equipped advocate.

No important organization in this country is so misunderstood, undervalued or under-supported than the United Nations. Americans don't get it. Not in DC, not in the media, not even in the Universities and think tanks across this vast nation, do the writers and

speakers about American foreign policy appreciate the growing importance of the UN in all of its multiple forms in dealing with the global issues confronting human civilization.

A wise Chinese philosopher said that when there are troubles under the heavens, small problems are made big problems and the big problems are ignored. When there is order under the heavens big problems are made smaller and the small problems are dealt with routinely. The role of the UN is to keep members states focused on reducing the threats to civilization of the big problems – climate change, pandemics, proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the many ravages of poverty. The challenge for Americans is to comprehend this indispensable role of the United Nations in this civilization saving role.

Our diva, Gillian Sorenson, carries that message to Americans about the United Nations reaching every corner of this nation with passion, professionalism, and personal charisma that is unequalled. We are proud to share in this honor to Gillian today. Eleanor Roosevelt would have approved and also would have been most proud.