

# Meet the Founders of La Leche League International

by Judy Torgus, USA



In the summer of 1956, seven women realised that breastfeeding mothers needed support from other mothers. Marian Tompson, one of the original seven Founders of La Leche League International, said recently in a television interview, “It just didn’t seem fair to us that mothers were not able to breastfeed their babies even though they wanted to do it.”

Marian, along with the six other Founders – Mary White, Viola Lennon, Mary Ann Cahill, Mary Ann Kerwin, Betty Wagner, and Edwina Froehlich—did not plan to establish a worldwide organisation. But they responded to the need and stepped up to the challenge. Remarkably, after 50 years, all seven of them are still active in the organisation and they are enjoying the events and festivities surrounding the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration.

What began at a church picnic in Elmhurst, Illinois, USA, is now an organisation spread all over the world with information in multiple languages and recognition from medical associations and government agencies as the world’s foremost authority on breastfeeding.

It started with a simple dream—to help mothers who wanted to give their babies the very best start in life. None of the seven women imagined that their dream would travel around the world and affect the lives of millions of mothers and babies.

The rapid spread of the organisation happened because so many mothers agree with Marian’s observation. Once mothers discover the simple facts about how to breastfeed successfully, they are eager to share this information far and wide, especially with other mothers.

To honor the Founders, celebrations of the LLLI 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary are being held in locations all over the world where local LLL families are joining together in a variety of events. In August, a 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Picnic was held in Wilder Park, where Marian and Mary first discussed the idea of helping other mothers breastfeed. More than 300 adults and children attended the picnic, including many of the Founders’ children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

A more formal celebration was held in October. One hundred and seventy people joined the Founders and their families at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala Dinner. The culmination of the Anniversary Celebration will be in July 2007, when the LLLI 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference

will be held in Chicago, Illinois, USA. For more information, see [www.llli.org](http://www.llli.org).

Whenever the Founders are asked to reflect on their achievements, each one gives credit to their families. They point out that the support and encouragement of their families enabled them to continue their involvement in La Leche League for all these years.

When La Leche League began in 1956, all seven Founders were stay-at-home mothers. Their family size ranged from 2 to 6 children. One husband was an accountant, another was a doctor, and two were lawyers. Only three of the Founders had college degrees.

As the organisation grew, so did their families. Mary White eventually had 11 children, and Viola Lennon had 10, including a set of twins. Mary Ann Cahill and Mary Ann Kerwin had 9 children each, Betty Wagner and Marian Tompson had 7 each, and Edwina Froehlich had 3 sons. Yet they found a way to fit La Leche League into their busy lives because they were committed to the importance of the work they were doing.

Even after 50 years, they all still share one dream—that every mother everywhere will have a chance to learn about breastfeeding and share in its joys.

The Founders of La Leche League hold a very special place in my heart. I have been involved with the organisation and with the Founders for most of my life. I attended my first LLL meeting as an expectant first time mother, still in my teens, wanting to breastfeed my baby. And they taught me all that I needed to know.

Over the years, I have been involved in various aspects of the organisation and I have spent 30 years as a part of the LLLI Publications Department. I am proud to offer this tribute to the LLLI Founders, and to thank them for all they have given me and all they have given to the world. And I extend my thanks to all of you who are carrying on the message of the importance of breastfeeding to mothers and babies all over the world. You are helping to make the Founders’ dream come true.

*Judy Torgus, Publications Director, La Leche League International, River Grove, Illinois, USA, Mother of 4 grown children, grandmother of 7 and LLL Leader since 1962*



**50TH ANNIVERSARY  
CONFERENCE  
50 Years--Celebrating the Power  
of Breastfeeding**

**Chicago, Illinois USA--Where It  
All Started!  
July 20-23, 2007**

“50 Years--Celebrating the Power of Breastfeeding” will be the theme of the 2007 La Leche League International (LLL) Conference. The Conference will be held in Chicago Illinois USA from July 20-23, 2007 at the Hilton Chicago. This meeting will be the culmination of a year-long celebration of the founding of LLLI in 1956.

The power of breastfeeding is evident in the properties of human milk. World health experts estimate that exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life could save at least 1.3 million lives a year. Human milk is a living and changing substance that is designed to provide all the nutrients a baby needs in exactly the right proportion. Breastfeeding provides invaluable immunological protection from a host of diseases and is the cornerstone of lifelong health. Breastfed babies also develop better language skills and higher IQs as they grow.

Breastfeeding affords powerful emotional benefits as well. Nursing is a source of great comfort and security for babies, and the skin-to-skin contact stimulates the baby and enhances bonding. The power of breastfeeding affects the mother who is physiologically different because of the hormones associated with breastfeeding. Mothers who breastfeed reduce their risk of developing breast or ovarian cancer, urinary tract infections, and osteoporosis.

The influence of breastfeeding extends to the environment as the most ecologically sound form of infant feeding. Breastfeeding affects economics as well as ecology. When more mothers breastfeed, governments save money otherwise spent on subsidies for artificial feeding. Women all over the world who breastfeed their babies enrich their local economies by reducing health care costs and conserving energy.

We may never know all the ways in which human milk protects both infants and adults from disease. Most mothers continue breastfeeding because it's not only a wonderful way to feed babies, but also an effective mothering tool, and a once-in-a-lifetime experience. As a mother nurtures her child at the breast, she gains confidence and feels empowered not only in her role as a mother but in other facets of her life.

LLL is a nonprofit organization founded by seven women who wanted to help other mothers learn about breastfeeding. The power of mother-to-mother breastfeeding support has helped LLLI become an internationally recognized authority on breastfeeding with a network that includes LLL Leaders and Groups in countries all over the globe. A Professional Advisory Board reviews information on medical issues. Visit the LLLI Web site at [www.lalecheleague.org](http://www.lalecheleague.org)

Plan now to celebrate the power of breastfeeding at the LLLI Conference. As Anwar Fazal says in the Foreword to the seventh edition of *THE WOMANLY ART OF BREASTFEEDING*, “The natural power of breastfeeding is one of the greatest wonders of the world.”