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We Asked . . . Victoria Middleton

About her first year as executive director of the state ACLU

- Kristen Hankla

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Job: Executive director, ACLU S.C. National Office.

Residence: Charleston.

Family: 19-year-old son, Alex.

Hobbies: Travel, books and films, dining out.

Victoria Middleton

Q: You became executive director of the S.C. ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) exactly one year ago. How has the job compared to what you expected?

A: The work is continually stimulating, never predictable. We hear stories about challenges to constitutional rights from all kinds of people in every corner of South Carolina. The economic downturn of the past year is a real test for nonprofits; it makes the need for reforms more urgent.

Q: What accomplishment from the first year are you proudest of?

A: Attracting new members and developing strong relationships with advocacy partners throughout South Carolina. We are working together on voting rights, juvenile justice, public education and other issues that touch a lot of lives.

Q: What's your No. 1 goal for the coming year?

A: To grow the organization and to take cases that impact people's lives significantly. We can't help every individual, but we aim to protect important civil liberties.

Q: You and two other women (Susan Dunn, staff attorney, and Jan Landry, office manager and program coordinator) make up the entire S.C. ACLU national office. Are more women than men involved with ACLU nationally?

A: No, our local demographic makeup is by chance. We all just wanted to use our very different skills and experiences to give back and do something meaningful at this time

in our lives. We will add diversity as we add cooperating attorneys and board members.

Q: What is your affiliate doing to extend the rights of women?

A: The issues with the biggest potential impact on women in South Carolina include reproductive health, education, equal pay for equal work, violence against women.

Q: Previously you worked in the foreign service. What did your job entail?

A: My work involved supporting press freedoms, rule of law and economic development. My last job was overseeing State Department human rights reports and democracy projects in Asia and Latin America.

Q: Do you miss it?

A: It was a privilege to serve and an amazing experience to live overseas for 15 years. Traveling abroad is a powerfully life-changing education. But it's a privilege to live in Charleston, too.

Q: You said you love to travel. What's your next trip?

A: I'm going to Indiana to visit my son in college. He was born in the Philippines, went to kindergarten in Estonia, has traveled alone to La Paz and Moscow, but wanted to go to school in the Midwest.

Places I would still like to see include Cambodia, Tibet, Cuba, Burma. Closed societies fascinate me. They make us appreciate even more the freedoms we have in our lively democracy.

Q: Who is your hero?

A: My Swedish grandmother. She was only 18 when her father died, and she was put on a boat to New York to make a new life; she eventually brought her mother and five other siblings over. It's a typical immigrant story but still inspires me.

In the more public arena, I've had the great luck to meet remarkable heroes in their lifetime: Mother Teresa and Philippine President Corazon Aquino.

Q: What is your guilty pleasure?

A: Watching old movies made before 1950, however good or bad.

Q: What are you passionate about?

A: Making the world a bit better for our kids, all our kids. We have made progress in my lifetime, but we can do so much more.