

‘Service above self’ for 100 years



PETER LEE, RECORD STAFF

As a millennium project in 2000, Rotary clubs in Kitchener and Waterloo created a Peace Park on the grounds of RIM Park in Waterloo.

Once a bastion of male business elites, Rotary clubs have adapted to the times and still attract members keen to make a difference here and around the world

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WATERLOO REGION

Ralph Adams was a changed man in 1969 when he returned from three years serving as a dentist with the Canadian Armed Forces in Europe. When the Toronto native and his family arrived in the Preston area of Cambridge, it didn't take him long to end up at a Rotary meeting, wanting to do some good and make a difference in both his new hometown and around the world.

"Europe changed me," Adams recalled in an interview. "We became very involved in travel, involved with international things. Rotary is the service club that's involved internationally."

Soon he found himself running a deep fryer at the annual Preston Rotary fundraising carnival, driving needy children to doctor appointments and selling raffle tickets to support

the local Rotary treatment centre for crippled children, now called KidsAbility and located in Waterloo.

There is no question in his mind that any community is better for the service clubs it has, Adams said.

As International Rotary marks its centennial this year, local Rotarians say the organization described as the elder statesman of service clubs remains as vital and vibrant as ever. There have been changes, they say, but the core ethic of "service above self" continues to shape the organization.

Around the world, Rotary has 1.2 million members in 28,200 clubs in 166 countries. In Waterloo Region, there are nine Rotary clubs with a total of about 450 members. They each pay about \$1,200 for annual membership, which includes the cost of their meals at weekly meetings.

Combined, the local clubs raise about \$1.1 million annually for local programs and for international projects that include foreign exchanges and programs for peace, work training and education. Local Rotary volunteers also travel the world to run development and health projects.

For example, Rotarians from Cambridge clubs recently returned from Africa where they inoculated hundreds of children against polio, part of International Rotary's decade-long, \$500-million PolioPlus effort to eradicate the disease.

Rotary was once the bastion of the male business elite in Waterloo Region — as it was in other communities around the world. Now, say local Rotarians, it has transformed itself into a voice for positive change while continuing its tradition of community service.

Adams recalled weekly meetings at the old Kress Hotel during his first years as a Preston Rotary member. Business leaders always arrived first and gathered at a round table.

"It was the people who ran the community. Bigwigs from the town. For me, it's more egalitarian today," Adams said.

Today, blue suits aren't required and meeting sing-alongs, once common, are a rarity. Women are welcome to join, although some clubs do still have all-male memberships.

Cathy Buchanan, Preston-Hespeler's president this year, said she used to hear stories about how Rotary was a club for white men in suits. They didn't scare her. Once she had been invited to a meeting, she wanted to join.

"My club is known as the old boys club . . . it was known as the money club. There was the senators' table," she said.

"When I found out what they did, I wanted to do something for the community, (even) knowing I didn't have the time. Over the years, I got in deeper and deeper."

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Local Rotary clubs are celebrating the centennial of their organization with multi-year park development projects.

In Waterloo, a Rotary "Peace Park" is nearly complete at the RIM Park recreational facility. In Cambridge, Rotarians have begun refurbishing the Dumfries Conservation Area, a park and greenspace given to the public years ago by one of the Cambridge area's first Rotarians.

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