

Hugs and Hockey Sticks

By Trevor Black

Who are these Urban Spirits in Edmonton? The short answer is the Urban Spirits are a group of people who, while having fun and enjoying the company of others, make serious differences in our city of Edmonton and on our planet of Earth. Making serious differences in our city AND on our planet is a bold statement which I will elucidate, though you're likely eager to discover what "Hugs and Hockey Sticks" is all about—I'm getting there. (Okay, so it wasn't a short answer.)

You may have heard the Urban Spirits mentioned in the same breath as Rotary, which is true—their official name is Rotary Club of Edmonton Urban Spirits. The Urban Spirits are one of over 34,000 Rotary clubs, world-wide, which make up Rotary International. Rotary International is dedicated to, among other things, the ideal of "advancement of international understanding, goodwill, and peace through a world fellowship...of service." Whew, kind of dry—that came from www.rotary.org. It means Rotary is about contributing to your community at home and the larger community of the world to make things better. To understand Rotary it's helpful to read their Four-Way Test. Four questions are to be asked before actions taken or decisions made, and to each the answer must be 'yes.'

1. Is it the truth?
2. Is it fair to all concerned?
3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?
4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Though many people may not know what Rotary is, or maybe they have a vague idea about the organization, or they even imagine it to be somewhat secretive and mysterious—Rotary is quite mundane. Honestly, one of their

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many projects is to eradicate polio completely, and since they began in 1979, they've only been able to reduce polio infections in children by 99%, *planet wide*. Nope, not exciting at all, especially to all those kids who were vaccinated against polio and who were given a chance to live, a chance to grow, a chance to thrive without twisted limbs. And no, not exciting at all that in recent years the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation entrusted over \$400 million to Rotary International to continue the battle against the disease. And no, Rotary isn't mysterious, Rotarians just want to help—there are no secret handshakes (but in lieu of a secret handshake you do get a nifty little pin to wear—ah, there's the mystery: why is Rotary's logo a gear?), no covert societies, no ulterior motives, no hats, and no barriers to entry. A Rotarian will happily sponsor anyone who wants to join Rotary. The clubs are always looking for enthusiastic, committed people who want to take part in projects for the betterment of their community and the betterment of their world. Which brings us back to the Urban Spirits...

So what do the Urban Spirits *do*? Every Rotary club picks a cause, something to focus their efforts on. The Urban Spirits chose “kids at risk” as their cause, so all the money collected through the club's fundraising efforts is donated to charities and organizations which help kids who are having a tough time.

The club recently celebrated their 10th anniversary by helping purchase two service dogs for the Zebra Child Protection Centre. The Zebra Child Protection Centre supports and accompanies abused children through the difficult and frightening process of the criminal justice system. The dogs are a calming and friendly presence for the kids when questions need to be asked which no child should ever have to be asked, and the dogs are even permitted to go into court

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with a child when it comes time to testify. These are special dogs, and these special dogs cost \$50,000.

The Urban Spirits are also active in the community. They sponsor, cook, and serve spaghetti dinners at Prince Charles School when the inner-city school has parent-teacher meetings. The school discovered more parents are able to come meet their kids' teachers after regular work hours, and by serving supper at the school there is more time available for the meetings. There is no money in the education budget to serve suppers to parents, and the Urban Spirits are eager and glad to help.

Unfortunately, there are many opportunities to help "kids at risk." Part of being a Rotary club means looking to other places in the world that need help. Every year the Urban Spirits allot funds for help with international projects. In the past they've sent money to an orphanage in Malawi, funded water filtration apparatus for villages in Central America, as well as partnered with other Rotary clubs for bigger projects such as equipping a truck as a mobile dentistry for villages in rural Thailand. Having a place to live, clean water to drink, and healthy teeth to chew gives those far-away kids a better chance for a better life.

The Urban Spirits like to have fun. Though they're serious about service for their community, they do it with a smile and, perhaps, a hint of mischief in their eyes. How many service clubs hold their meetings at a brewery?

Clubs of any sort have their traditions; traditions provide continuity between the past and the present by honouring significant events in the club's history, and they also instill the character of a club. Urban Spirits' meetings begin by

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singing “Oh Canada,” and although their meetings are more casual than might be expected at a Rotary meeting, newcomers are most likely quite startled when, just as the last notes of Canada’s anthem die off, the Urban Spirits pick up small hockey sticks which have been placed on the tables and start vigorously and loudly beating the table tops with them. It was the Stanley Cup playoff season when the club chartered, and the beating of the hockey sticks mimics hockey teams beating their sticks on the ice after the national anthems have been sung—a link to the past when the club was just starting out. Another tradition gives the club members an opportunity to get to know their fellow club members a little better. Each week a different club member is tasked with asking “The Question of the Day,” and then each club member, in turn, stands and answers the question. The question can be about anything—which, on more than one occasion has led to much laughter. Indeed, once, when the Rotary District Governor was visiting—kind of a big deal—a lady Urban Spirit asked the question, “Using the name of the street you grew up on, and the month of your birthday, what would be your pornstar name?” Hilarity ensued. And yes, the District Governor, also a woman, answered the question. Finally, though there are other traditions practiced by the Urban Spirits, I’ll leave you with this one: When a person becomes a member of a Rotary club there is a short ceremony where some serious words are said and the club president pins a Rotary pin on the new club member. In other Rotary clubs the rest of the club then gets in line and shakes the newly-pinned member’s hand. The Urban Spirits, however, get in line and give the newly-pinned member a hug.

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