

1951



2026

True patriot love

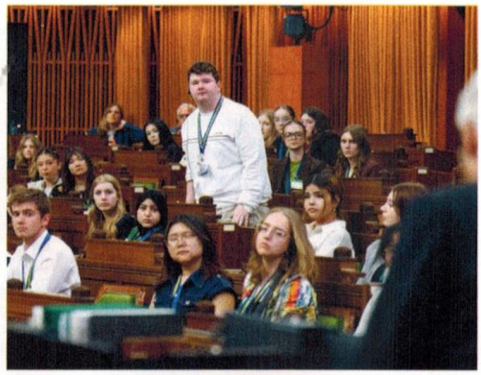
For 75 years, the Rotary Club of Ottawa has guided Canadian high school students on an Adventure in Citizenship **By Geoffrey Johnson**

On 21 May 1951, the Rotary Club of Ottawa welcomed 135 high school students from across Canada to their nation's capital. In the following days, as they participated in a newly created program called An Adventure in Citizenship, the students attended a session of the House of Commons; visited the castellated National Gallery and Rideau Hall, the regal home of the governor general; received citizenship certificates from Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent, who declared the group a vital part of Canada's great natural resources; and had lunch with and heard a speech from Lester Pearson, the future prime minister and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Being teenagers, the kids also wore funny hats, performed zany stunts, and waltzed away an evening to the terpsichorean melodies played by a local orchestra.

At a farewell luncheon at the luxurious Château Laurier, 17-year-old Laura Wiles of Amherst, Nova Scotia, expressed the students' appreciation for everything they had experienced, a sentiment endorsed by the *Ottawa Journal*. "The purpose [of the program] is to promote better citizenship by letting the young people see democracy in action on Parliament Hill and to see the machinery of government in motion in the capital during a four-day stay. Surely a worthy enterprise," wrote the paper in an editorial. "Well done, Rotary!" Vowed one club member: "It is intended that this shall be continued as a permanent annual project in the interests of better citizenship."

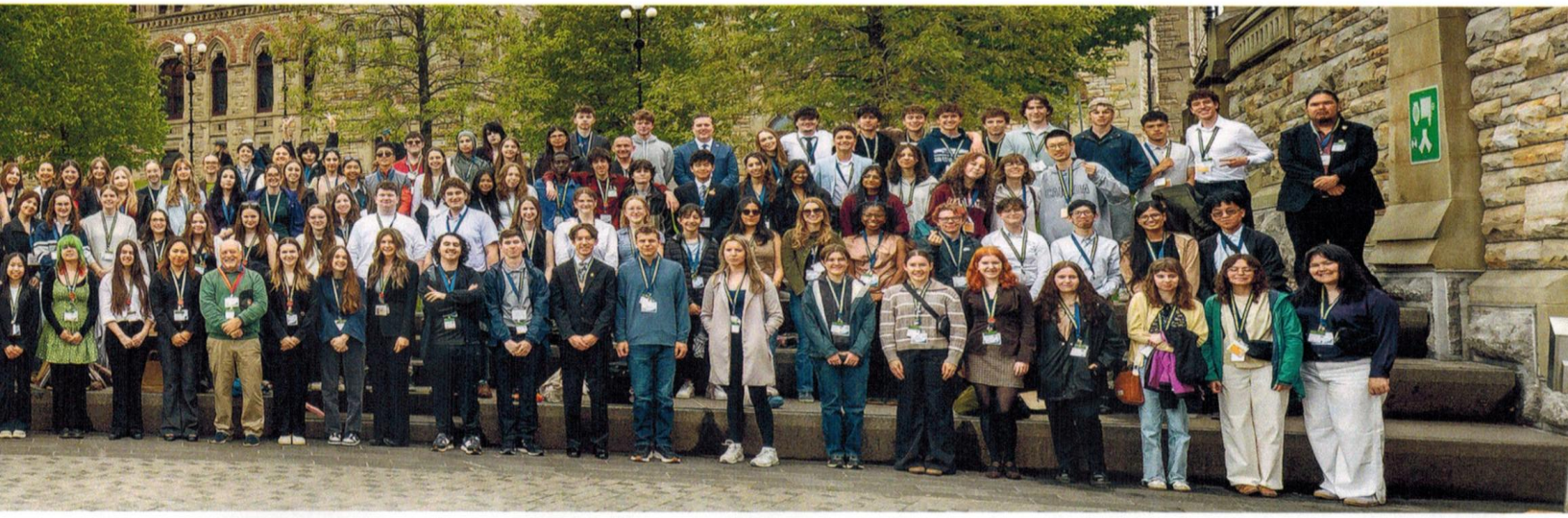
Promise made, promise kept. This spring, on the 75th anniversary of Adventure in Citizenship, the Rotary Club of Ottawa once again welcomed teenagers from across Canada to their nation's capital. On 23 May, more than 170 high school students from all 10 provinces and the Northwest Territories checked in at the University of Ottawa, their home base for the next four days. Selected and sponsored by their local Rotary clubs — who made their choices based on students' academic records, leadership abilities, and community involvement — the teens began their first full day engaging with Gilbert W. Whiteduck, a leader of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabe First Nation community and a strong advocate for Indigenous education and social justice.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF ROTARY CLUB OF OTTAWA





Students selected for the Adventure in Citizenship program spend a day on Parliament Hill meeting with MPs. The program promotes more engaged citizenship by allowing young people to see democracy in action.



"We wanted to lean into what it means to be a great citizen in Canada, to lean into helping these young people see that they can take a role in shaping their country," says Geralyn Pluim-Klassen, who co-chaired this year's program with fellow club member Laurel Hubber. "One of the things we reflected on is how citizenship is seen by Indigenous populations in Canada. Gilbert Whiteduck was quite frank about some of the challenges that Indigenous people face, so that was an interesting start."

Students also heard from club member Spencer Henson, a professor at the Ontario Agricultural College at the University of Guelph, and British Columbia MP Jake Sawatzky, one of the youngest members of Parliament — a perfect prelude to the following day's visit to Parliament Hill. There students heard from Francis Scarpaleggia, the Speaker of the House of Commons, and Elizabeth May, the leader of the Green Party of Canada, among others. Students also mingled with other MPs and enjoyed a presentation from the Parliament pages, first-year university stu-

Out of the mouths of teens

With funding from the Young Citizens Foundation, the Adventure in Citizenship program awarded $1,000 scholarships to three students. More than 50 students submitted essays, either on paper or as videos; here are edited excerpts from the winning submissions.

Dirk Gates, sponsored by the Rotary Club of Middleton, Nova Scotia

Every citizen has a duty and a part to play in this country's story. First and foremost, each Canadian is called to be kind, to treat others as we would like to be treated. Not only should we be kind to one another in person-to-person contexts, but we must also pursue systemic and cultural kindness. This can be done through listening to people of differing viewpoints, actively participating in community initiatives for change, and making an effort to be the change we want to see. If we want a flourishing Canada, we must pursue the flourishing of the people around us.

We should strive to foster a culture that represents all of the peoples, backgrounds, and lived experiences that exist in Canadian communities. There is such great

dents only a little older than the Adventure in Citizenship participants. Throughout, says Pluim-Klassen, "the kids were super-engaged and asking questions."

The students also had plenty of time for fun and socializing, including a bus tour of Ottawa, a talent show, and a traditional French-Canadian meal with music and square dancing at a sugar shack (the urban version of the cabins where maple trees are tapped for the sap that becomes maple syrup). A snafu in the plans for transportation to the final night's festivities — dinner and dancing at a restaurant on Dow's Lake — turned into a blessing when double-decker buses were swapped in at the last minute.

"Last year we had trouble getting the kids to leave the restaurant," says Pluim-Klassen. "But this year, with the double-decker buses, they all wanted to sit on top, so they hurried out. They had so much fun dressing up and dancing and enjoying their last night together."

Earlier that day, the students had convened in a former church for an activism-through-art session. "The kids were at long tables with craft paper and pastels," explains Pluim-Klassen. "The artist leading the session made a presentation and then put on different pieces of music. They had to colour with the music, kind of like stream of consciousness." Students added a question about citizenship, and these newly created "banners" served as a backdrop on the program's final day, when they witnessed about 30 people being sworn in as citizens.

"You see these new citizens with their families, their young kids wearing red and waving Canadian flags, and we all said the Oath of Citizenship with them," recalls an emotional Pluim-Klassen. "It was really quite moving and nicely capped off everything we'd been learning all week."

As this year's Adventure in Citizenship wrapped up, one participant — Loghan Tolman, who was sponsored by the Rotary Club of Bolton in Ontario — expressed what he'd taken away from the program. "I learned what it means to be a Canadian, how I can influence politics and make change in my community and advocate for what I believe in," said Tolman. "I learned why I feel prideful about Canada and what it takes to maintain such a beautiful country."

As the *Ottawa Journal* wrote 75 years ago: Well done, Rotary! ■

beauty in the variety of cultures and traditions in Canada.

Canada is my home and a wonderful place. Maintaining the beauty of Canada and continuing to add to it is hard work, but many hands make light work. Provided we all pitch in, Canada can continue to blossom and be home to a multitude for generations to come.

Laila Kinnear, sponsored by the Rotary Club of Olds, Alberta

Canada is one of the most beautiful countries on Earth. I know my piece of it pretty well: farmers' fields, open sky, and a creek that runs through the back of our farm. This creek prompted me to think seriously about my responsibilities as a Canadian citizen.

The charter gives everyone the right to a clean environment. But rights without responsibilities are just words on paper. Someone actually has to put in the work of protecting the environment. If you take too much from a river, it dries up. Canadians give back.

A river flows from one community to the next. What goes into it upstream shows up downstream. Our responsibility as Canadians works the same way. What you do in your corner flows outward. You're always upstream of somebody, so what you put in matters.

A river is built from small tributaries. Every bit adds up. Every Canadian lives somewhere along the river. We all have the right to clean water, safe communities, and a country worth belonging to. But those things don't just exist. Someone upstream made them possible. I want to be one of those people.

Paisley McGill, sponsored by the Rotary Club of Ladner, British Columbia

Canadians have a balance of rights and responsibilities. We have freedoms, equality, and legal protection. But in return, we are expected to follow the law, respect others, and contribute to our communities.

Our Canadian atmosphere envelops you with the warmth of inclusion and respect. It's our duty as Canadians to maintain that atmosphere. When you receive that maple leaf passport signifying citizenship, you are now entrusted to uphold the values of Canada.

In my own life, I apply those rights and responsibilities through consistent involvement. Actions like helping kids read may seem like simple gestures, but they go much deeper by helping shape our future generations. I also work at our local farmers market that directly contributes to our community both economically and environmentally.

Growing up in Canada is a privilege and a blessing. The freedom of being yourself is a right I cherish. But being a Canadian also delegates you responsibilities. Citizenship is never passive. It is something actively practiced every single day.