

our clubs



Dutch treat

Rotary Club of Holland, Michigan

There are about 100 people at a June meeting of the Rotary Club of Holland, Michigan, and it's a boisterous crowd because half of them are 12 years old.

"Let's hear it for the red team!" A dozen middle school students jump up. The room erupts in applause.

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The students pass around a microphone and introduce themselves. They are participants in the club's Leaders for the 21st Century program, a three-day camp for incoming seventh graders. As a part of the program, the students – who have been identified by their teachers as emerging leaders – attend the club's lunchtime meeting.

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Test and the importance of being involved in the community. Our hope is that they become involved in Interact, Rotaract, and eventually Rotary." Participant Sarah Sanderson, who completed the program in 2000, even went on to become a Rotary Peace Fellow.

The club meets every Thursday at the Haworth Inn on the campus of Hope College. "For some of these kids, this is their first time on a college campus," says Russ Miller, who was 2017-18 president of the club.

Bob Armour, a local educator, worked with several local Rotarians, including

Tom DePree, a member of the Holland club, to launch the leadership program in 2000. "This training is the beginning," Armour, a member of the nearby Rotary Club of Zeeland, tells the students. "You take this with you." The Zeeland club is a joint sponsor of the program.

After they start seventh grade, the kids are asked to take on a variety of leadership roles at their schools. "Maybe they are assigned to help a child who is being bullied or someone with language difficulties," says Miller. "It's a great experience for these kids," adds Piper. Once they reach high school or college, graduates of the program can serve as counselors to younger participants.

As its name suggests, this town has a strong Dutch influence. Albertus Christiaan van Raalte, a minister who led a group of settlers from the Netherlands to the area, established the town in 1846. It's home to an actual, working Dutch windmill (the last the Netherlands allowed to be exported, in 1964) and a wooden shoe factory. And every spring, 5 million tulips bloom and 500,000 tourists arrive to celebrate everything Dutch. *Reader's Digest* named Tulip Time America's best small-town festival.

Church membership is another important part of life here, with both the Reformed Church in America and Christian Reformed Church based in the area. "It's a fairly conservative place," Miller says. "Tulip Time is about as wild as we get."

Beyond local projects like sponsoring park benches on scenic Windmill Island and several Little Free Libraries around town, the Holland club also participates in international projects.

"We're working on our second global grant project in the past three years," Miller says. The current project, in Kenya, focuses on improving farming practices, something that member Kathy DeVries, who chairs the project,

knows a lot about. "My great-grandparents emigrated from the Netherlands. They were typical crop farmers before my family switched over to perennial flower farming," DeVries says.

"The project helps dairy farmers switch from grazing cattle and walking them to a river, to having the food come to them," she says. "In a culture of scarcity, they feed the cows just enough to keep them alive [in Kenya]. But when cows go to the river, they overgraze the same path again and again. They become stressed. Their calves don't survive. The whole enterprise is unsustainable."

In 2012, DeVries visited a Dutch pastor with a hobby farm in Kenya. "The pastor had grown up on dairy farms in the Netherlands," she says. He started letting his neighbors in Kenya borrow his equipment and teaching them to make silage – a type of fermented feed that can be stored for months in airtight containers. Because the feed is more nutritious than dried maize, the cows' milk production increases and more calves survive.

Several years after that visit, the Holland club partnered with the Rotary Club of Eldoret-Uasin Gishu, Kenya, on a \$62,500 global grant to fund a tractor and a training program for a village. "The pastor's program was kind of the pilot," DeVries says. The funding now affords every dairy farmer in the village the opportunity to learn to make silage at a demonstration farm.

Keeping its commitment to serving area youth, the club offers scholarships for area teens who want to join Rotarians participating in projects abroad. "We're seeing a rise of ethnocentrism in the world," Armour tells the middle school students at the Leaders for the 21st Century program. "But not among Rotarians. They maintain a global perspective."

– VANESSA GLAVINSKAS

Previous page: Rotarians Russ Miller (from left), Kathy DeVries, Bob Armour, and Wendy Piper from the Holland, Michigan, area.