

# INITIAL ROTARY SCHOLAR REPORT



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By Sean Toal, District 6330 Scholar

I'm pictured above after matriculation, a ceremony that marks my acceptance by the university. My outfit is 'sub-fusc', the traditional Oxford academic dress worn for matriculation and while taking exams.

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## INTRODUCTION

This report details my first three months as a Rotary postgraduate scholar studying Latin America at Oxford University. These months have been turbulent as I adjusted to life in a foreign country, simultaneously balancing schoolwork with the outstanding extracurricular opportunities offered by Oxford and my host Rotarians. I am pleased to report I was well prepared by District 6330, and in just a few months I have made great progress in my academic program, engagements with Rotary, and cultural exchanges. Thank you to everyone in District 6330 who made this experience possible.

## PREPARATION AND ARRIVAL

Overall, Ms. Johnna Johansen and District 6330 did an outstanding job preparing me for my arrival in England. Some of the best advice I received from Ms. Johansen and Ms. Barb Robins was to speak with my bank about transferring money and making payments overseas. I spoke with my bank and established a plan for paying my expenses throughout the year. There was one small hiccup with receiving the scholarship money. Apparently, since District 6330 uses a Canadian bank, it would have taken 3-6 weeks for my US bank to process the scholarship check. I contacted the district president and treasurer and they were able to arrange a wire transfer which worked fine.

I knew details in advance about my host Rotary club and district, and there was no problem establishing contact with them by phone and email once I arrived in the United Kingdom. My hosts even offered to meet me at the airport in London which was very kind. District 6330 and my home club of Flushing also equipped me with business cards, pins, and banners to distribute to my Rotary district in England. As far as I know, I'm the only scholar who was given pins to take with them. I take them to most Rotary functions and the Rotarians have reacted very positively when I offer them pins! Overall, I was well prepared for my arrival and had no major difficulties.

## ACADEMIC PROGRESS

The academic environment at Oxford could not be more different than West Point. At West Point, courses were rigidly scheduled every day and frequent exams were given to measure our understanding. In my program at Oxford, term time requires me to attend one or two classes per week, and none of my work is graded until June. In that month, I submit an extended essay and sit three exams meant to test me on everything I've learned over the entire year. The exams and essay alone determine whether I fail, pass, or pass with distinction. Oxford's method of instruction requires each student to be responsible enough to spend hours reading independently each week to keep up with the course material.

Adjusting to this method of instruction has been one of my biggest challenges, but I managed it successfully in my first term. I planned out each week in my calendar, distributing the work so that I had a few weekends free for more enjoyable activities. Towards the end of term, there were some late nights as I struggled to

## INITIAL ROTARY SCHOLAR REPORT

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meet deadlines but I am satisfied with the massive amount I've learned about Latin America in just an eight week term.

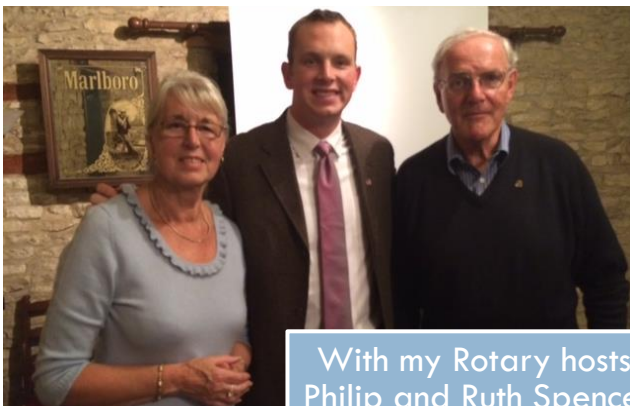
I've decided to write my extended essay about the implementation of the Leahy Law in Latin America. The Leahy Law is a U.S. law forbidding aid and training to any foreign military unit that has a poor human rights record. This law was initially championed by human rights groups but many now question whether it has had any positive impact. For example, Mexico's military continues to commit human rights violations like torture and 'disappearances' and massive amounts of military aid continue to flow from the U.S. to Mexico. My research seeks to understand exactly what has gone wrong with the Leahy Law, and what steps can be taken to strengthen the security forces of our allies, while also eliminating gross violations of human rights.

The resources and faculty of the university are outstanding. The library at Oxford is unlike any other and has the best Latin American collection in the world. My professors have won awards and published dozens of books and articles on a variety of topics in Latin America. Yet they are easily accessible and helpful when I have questions. I'm sure I won't have nearly as much confidence when it is exam time in June, but thus far I have enjoyed and learned a lot from my courses.

## ROTARY ENGAGEMENTS

My host district in the UK is Rotary District 1090, and my hosts are named Philip and Ruth Spencer of Rotary Club of Eynsham. I have completed nine Rotary engagements, or about one per week during the first term:

1. *Tour of Oxford organized by District 1090*
2. *District 1090 Rotary Scholars informational meeting and dinner*
3. *Gave my initial presentation to Rotary Club of Eynsham, England*
4. *Gave a short presentation to District 1090 at Meet the Scholars night*
5. *Toured London with District 1090*
6. *Toured Windsor Castle and Eton with District 1090*
7. *Attended Trivia Night fundraiser with Rotary Club of Haddenham*
8. *Assisted Rotary Club of Eynsham with 'Santa's Sleigh' fundraiser*
9. *Attended Christmas dinner with Rotary Club of Eynsham*



With my Rotary hosts,  
Philip and Ruth Spencer  
of Eynsham.



Presenting a District 6330  
banner to the president of  
Rotary Club of Eynsham



At 'Meet the Scholars' dinner  
with District 1090



Helping Rotary of Eynsham with  
the 'Santa's Sleigh' fundraiser

One of my favorite Rotary engagements so far has been the Santa's Sleigh fundraiser. Rotary Club of Eynsham is a fairly new Rotary Club and they have been doing this fundraiser for the past three years with great success. On the night I volunteered, we raised 320 British Pounds, or nearly \$600 in just two hours.

The Rotarians use a truck and a trailer that's been converted into Santa's sleigh. They have cutout reindeer and Christmas lights attached to the sleigh, and one Rotarian dresses as Santa and rides on the sleigh. The sleigh is slowly driven on a preplanned route through one of Eynsham's residential areas, typically a younger neighborhood with lots of children. Speakers attached to the sleigh play loud Christmas music so everyone knows Santa is coming. Children rush outside to get a small candy treat from Santa while about eight Rotarians (plus me) wearing vests knock on doors and collect donations from parents. In just five nights so far this year Rotary of Eynsham raised about \$2000 with the Santa's sleigh fundraiser.

I describe the fundraiser in detail because it was highly successful and especially fun for the Rotarians who participated. My favorite part of the evening was watching the way small children react to the appearance of Santa right outside their house. Most of them are in their pajamas or have just gotten out of the bathtub but their parents rush them outside to take a photo with Santa and get a treat. The parents are very happy to give small donations and it gives Rotary Club of Eynsham a positive image in their community. I think this fundraiser could easily be done with similar success in District 6330 if it is not already.

## CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Living in a new country has been fascinating. I've had several opportunities to learn about new cultures through Rotary activities and some of my own travel around the UK and Europe. Additionally, my presentations have allowed me to share some of my own culture with other Rotarians.

District 1090 is used to hosting multiple scholars who come to the district to study at Oxford or one of the universities nearby. This year, there are thirteen scholars in the district, nine of whom are at Oxford. Oxford University is divided into 38 constituent colleges, and we have taken turns inviting other scholars to visit our college and have a meal in the dining hall. Interaction with the other scholars in the district has been one medium for cultural exchange.

## INITIAL ROTARY SCHOLAR REPORT

Trips around England organized by Rotary have been another great chance to learn about English culture. We toured London, Windsor Castle, and Eton School for Boys, with Rotarians from each location serving as tour guides. There are many similarities between the United States and England, but one major difference is England's infatuation with the royal family. The tour of the state rooms at Windsor Castle taught us about the royal family, and certainly showcased Her Majesty's wealth.

Eton boys' school was another interesting tour. Boarding schools exist in the United States, but are much more popular here. Eton is probably the most famous of these boarding schools, founded in the fifteenth century by King Henry VI to educate boys from the age of 13 to 18. Our tour guide was a Rotarian who also works as the buildings manager for the school. Eton has produced nineteen British prime ministers and Princes William and Harry are both Eton graduates. The private school is outrageously expensive, costing about \$60,000 per student, per year, and has never admitted women. Obviously, many view schools like Eton as institutions meant to perpetuate snobbery and aristocracy. However, our tour guide believes Eton gives children confidence, not arrogance.

Budget airlines make it possible for me to travel occasionally to Europe when I have a few days off. One company, Ryanair, has flights as cheap as \$20 to get to places like Dublin, Paris, etc. I have taken advantage of these offers to take trips to Paris and Budapest so far, plus I traveled to Dublin just before the start of term to visit family. While I only visited these three countries for short times, I was able to learn new things and visit locations I had only previously read about in textbooks. I hope to be able to travel to more new places during my vacations and when I have free weekends.

This scholarship program requires me to act as an ambassador, sharing my own culture with new people as well as learning about others. During my presentations I have met people genuinely interested in learning about the United States, and I am happy when I can share some of my own culture with them. In my initial presentation to Eynsham Rotary, questioners were interested in my military career and my thoughts about U.S. strategy and policy. I got asked some tough questions – "Did the United States learn ANYTHING from Iraq in the last ten years?" After reminding my audience that my opinions are my own and do not represent the U.S. Army, I answered the questions as honestly as I could.



With the other District 1090 scholars at Windsor Castle



During the tour of Eton Boys' School



At the Louvre museum in Paris



Rowing on the Thames River. Great workout!

## CONCLUSION

I could not be more thankful to Rotary District 6330 for the experiences I've had so far. Writing this report has given me a great opportunity to reflect on the material I've learned, the places I've seen, and the people I've met. Next year promises more great opportunities to report. I will progress further in my studies, and attend the three day District 1090 conference in Torquay, England. I also hope to do more traveling on my own, possibly even to locations as far as Morocco, Turkey, and Israel. The scholarship experience has been great so far, and I cannot wait to see what next year will bring.