

Multi-Millionaire Entrepreneur Helps Others Succeed

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By Pete DeLaunay

Persistence, work ethic and having an ‘owner’s attitude’ helped Gary Rubens on his journey from poverty to becoming a multi-millionaire, serial entrepreneur, angel investor, real estate investor, and major supporter/donor of the Washington State Opportunity Scholarship (WSOS) program that since 2011 has provided 6,800 college scholarships to high-performing, low-income students.

Gary’s situation out of high school prevented him from attending college, but his trajectory grew with support from supervisors at jobs in aircraft interior and furniture construction. During the 1980s with about \$20,000 in savings, he started his first company building contract furniture for hotels that grew to some \$3M in sales. In 1998 he launched an online lighting catalog, lightinguniverse.com that survived and thrived with some \$140M in sales – even during the ‘dot.com’ meltdown. He subsequently sold his company to Lowe’s for more than \$100M. He launched his next chapter as an investor and philanthropist, and in January, 2017, enrolled as a WSU freshman majoring in social sciences ‘to learn more about people’.



Since the sale to Lowe’s, he has invested in 84 companies, hearing ‘five or six pitches every day’. These sessions are followed by due diligence and financial support to help entrepreneurs take their ideas to the next level. “I gauge whether the founders of the idea are really ‘in’ and if they have anything to lose,” he says. “I don’t invest in those who have had enough or just want in and out...why should I?” His real estate acumen is equally simple. “It is easy to be a real estate expert in a rising tide,” he says. “We invest primarily in commercial properties with below market rents, and then we make improvements to increase value.”

His passion for helping low income kids go to college comes from his own experience and inability to find financial aid, long before the internet made such research commonplace. “Being poor is no fun because no one is going to give you anything,” he said. “My support for WSOS helps low income yet high performing high school students overcome the odds because education is needed for employment.”

President Mark opened the meeting by introducing Rabbi Daniel Weiner for the day's invocation followed by Kim Moore with the day's anthem accompanied by Burr Stewart on the piano.

In response to the devastation in Texas from Hurricane Harvey, President Mark brought two relief organizations to the podium to describe their relief efforts and needs: World Vision and the American Red Cross.

World Vision's David Owens said the situation in Texas 'keeps getting worse' as his organization plans to assemble and send 'women's hope kits' and 'hygiene kits' to 10,000 storm victims. Becky Fontaine with the American Red Cross said her organization is supporting 230 emergency shelters, served 180,000 meals and has 1,500 volunteers on site. Both organizations said donations are going to help feed and shelter people ravaged by the storm.



2017-2018 Seattle Rotary Service Foundation President, Kathy Williams, announced a \$50,000 pilot opportunity grants program where Rotarians can apply for special grants year-round, even using them to match District 5030 grant requests.

As a special feature this year, President Mark has asked past-president Don Kraft to provide historic club vignettes called *Four Bits*. "My *Four Bits* today celebrates exactly 30 years since we welcomed women into our club," he began. He said the move to admit women began as early as 1950, but it really didn't take hold until 1987 when Rotary International yielded to a lawsuit and calls for women to be admitted as members. "Fifty-three days later," Don said, "Seattle #4 had a flood of female member applications. Today women represent 19% of Rotary International, 34% of our club and eight of our most recent presidents, including Cindy Runger, have been women. Rotary is much stronger today with women in our club."



Promoting 'Public Works/Seattle Rep', funded in part with a Seattle neighborhood grant, Jeff Herrmann announced a four-performance play called 'The Odyssey', a musical adaptation of Homer's tale. Performances will include 150 Seattle citizens who will join professional actors on stage in key roles. Although the four performances 9/8 – 9/10 are 'sold out' -- standing room only tickets are available.

