

A Visit from the CEO of Seattle's Favorite Airline

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By John Hamer

Assunta Ng, who was among the first women members of Rotary, opened the meeting with an inspiring invocation that challenged us to think about “getting things undone” in our lives: “We have all had our share of getting things undone such as breaking up a relationship, family differences, firing employees, changing jobs, or terminating a contract. How do people usually undo things? Compromise. Attack. Get a lawyer.” She added that in her life, she asks herself: how satisfied is she with the process, are there innovative solutions, and will all parties still respect each other in the end? Her inspiration: The Rotary 4-Way Test!



Virginia McKenzie led us in singing “Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah” in celebration of spring, accompanied by **Ken Grant** on piano.

John Steckler introduced visiting Rotarians, **Lillian Sherman** introduced guests, and **Kim Moore** introduced several prospective new members at her table.

President Cathy noted that April is Membership Month, and **Joel Paget** introduced our newest member, **Randy Frisch**, president of City University. (See his bio in the Totem.)

President Cathy thanked **Ken Hamm** and **Bob Alexander** for their support of the weekly meeting videos. She also noted that May is “Service Month,” and challenged every member to participate in at least one hands-on service project.

Harold Scoggins, Chief of the Seattle Fire Department, announced that the May 10 meeting will honor men and women of the SFD, who put their lives on the line every day to protect us all.

Kathy Fahlman Dewalt, executive director and founding co-creator of “Ten Grands,” urged Rotarians to attend their 10th anniversary program at Benaroya Hall on May 13, which will include tickets to a special VIP complimentary party. She then introduced pianist Kelsey Keogh, a UW grad who sang and played “Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me” and “So This Is Love.”



Conrad Wouters introduced Brad Tilden of Alaska Airlines, our main program speaker. Tilden grew up near Sea-Tac Airport and is 25-year veteran of Alaska. He went to Highline High School and graduated from Pacific Lutheran University. He is on the board of the Washington



Roundtable, the Boy Scouts and Nordstrom, and is also president of the Seattle-King County Chamber of Commerce.

Tilden showed a short video that focused on Alaska's efforts to increase the number of students in STEM careers. He said that Washington ranks 49th in the nation in placing students in STEM-related jobs. He urged Rotarians to help change that.

When he asked, "Is anybody a customer?" almost everyone the room raised their hands. "Alaska credit cards?" Same number of hands. "Flown a million miles?" Tom Mesaros raised his hand. When Tilden asked if anyone had family, friends or neighbors who work for Alaska, several members did, and shouted out the jobs.

Tilden said that Alaska will sponsor "Aviation Day" in May, and more than 1,400 kids will participate in Seattle and Portland, many earning aviation merit badges as Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts.

"They will get a chance to tighten bolts – and yes, we will check," Tilden said to laughs.

"We're laying out the stepping stones for these kids to become pilots, mechanics, engineers, or bean counters," he said. "If they're the type that gets lost on their way to work, they might even become an executive," he joked.

"If Seattle wants to continue to be a center of innovation, we need to grow our talent pool -- and that's not happening today," he said. "We need a compelling, long-term vision for our education system of the future. Our system of education is the single best investment that we as a community can make."



He continued: "Education is the wellspring from which prosperity flows. Education is the great equalizer for families to move up the economic ladder and change their lives forever."

In a brief update on the company, Tilden mentioned improvements in plane interiors, satellite connectivity, free movies, free texting, the Virgin America merger, and expansion at Sea-Tac Airport.

"Things are kind of under construction right now, but we feel very good and confident about the future," he concluded.

In the Q&A period, **Kathy Williams** asked if Alaska will fly to Memphis, Tennessee, anytime soon. Tilden said: "We will at some point. It's in the top 5-7 cities on our list."

Anna Liotta asked about Alaska's use of social media, noting that she gets rapid responses to every Tweet. Tilden brought his corporate communications director, Bryan Zidar, to the stage to

answer. He said they have about two dozen employees handling social media, and their average response time is 5-10 minutes.

Laura Rehrmann asked how many women Alaska has as pilots or copilots. Tilden said he didn't know exactly, but he estimated 300 to 400, out of 1,800 total pilots.

Jim Moore asked about Alaska's strategy for surviving business cycles. Tilden called 2005-2008 "tough years," but the key was to keep a good balance sheet, keep costs low, and have a rainy day fund. "The real lesson of the past 10 years is that people want low fares," he said, noting that the company's earnings per quarter depended on the economy, fuel costs, and competition. But success over 5, 10, or 20 years depended on safety, customer service, and on-time performance.



David Woodward asked where will Alaska be flying in the next 10 or 20 years? Tilden said: "Memphis!" to big laughs. But he added: "For us, domestic markets are the top priority."

Finally, President Cathy announced that Alaska had donated two tickets to anywhere they fly. **Diankha Linear**, who is on Nordstrom's board with Tilden, asked him to draw a name from among the 40 Rotarians who brought in new members this year. Tilden asked if they should be First Class or Coach? "First Class," Rotarians shouted. **Gerry Adams** won the tickets.