

RYLA

By Monty McKeon, Tivy Interact Club

RYLA, the Rotary Youth Leadership Awards, is a wonderful program sponsored by Rotary International for the purpose of inspiring young people and teaching them the modes and facets of good leadership. It began in Queensland, Australia when the state government invited local Rotarians to help plan a festival to celebrate its upcoming centennial. Upon hearing that Princess Alexandra, then in her early twenties, would be in attendance, the Rotarians tailored the event's activities to fit her age group especially. More than three hundred men and women between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three were present, all of whom found the celebration to be a success. The Rotarians, noticing how popular the affair had been among its young attendees, saw potential to create an annual youth program similar to the one they had just coordinated. On May 2, 1960, they presented their idea to their district governor and, with his approval, RYLA was born and set with a single task—to train youth in character, leadership, personal development, and good citizenship. RYLA spread like wildfire across Australia and was approved as an international program at the RI convention at Sydney in 1971.

Now, RYLA is an established event in more than half of the five hundred twenty-nine Rotary districts across the globe, including our own. That said, I am proud to include myself among the one hundred forty-seven high school juniors chosen to participate in RYLA this year. Held in New Braunfels at the John Newcombe Tennis Ranch over the Martin Luther King weekend, the coordinators of the event managed to fill three days with enough action to span three weeks. Not a single second of time was wasted. We rose each morning at seven, launched into our exercises, ate our breakfast, and prepared for the day's activities, which ranged from motivational speakers and educational games to the first ever service project to be done at our RYLA.

Deven Schei, one of the speakers we had the pleasure of listening to, was kind enough to tell us the story of his life and hardships. When his brother Erik was first deployed to Iraq, Devin made him a solemn vow: "If something happens to you while you're over there, I promise to finish what you started." Tragically, "something" did happen. Deven's brother was shot in the head, rendering him a quadriplegic. Keeping true to his word, Deven joined the army and became a member of the 101st Airborne Air Assault Division. He was stationed overseas and, while he remembers joining the service as one of his proudest moments, his deployment ended in injury. He was hit by four 80mm and shot in his left shoulder. He lost a portion of his left calf and a piece of his left thigh. He awoke covered in shrapnel, with a slipped disc, missing cartilage in his back and knees, blind in his left eye, and with PTSD. After seventeen surgeries to repair

the damage, the pain and frustration and anguish were still not the greatest of his worries. His injuries prevented further deployment and effectively ended his military career. Even more devastating than this, however, he experienced an incredible sense of guilt for not being with his friends and comrades overseas that led him to depression and drug abuse. When he finally emerged from the abyss in which he'd fallen, he became involved with the Wounded Warriors, a foundation established to assist disabled veterans in finding normalcy in their civilian lives. After hearing his story and learning about his brother's situation, the organization gifted him with an especially designed bicycle, built so that the Schei brothers could participate in bike tours with fellow warriors. Together, they have participated in many of these tours around the country and Devin works with the Wounded Warriors by telling his story to the younger generations in hopes of inspiring them to achieve greatness and not allow their circumstances to bring them down.

After hearing his story, you would be hard pressed to find a dry eye in the room, among Rylarians and Rotarians alike. He touched everyone in the room that day, an impressive feat given the myriad backgrounds of his audience. Some, like me, come from a military family and have heard of the hardships of that lifestyle. Some had already made the decision to join the military in the coming years. Some had never spoken to a serviceman in their lives. No matter our background, we all left that room with a deeper understanding of the sacrifices made daily for the sake of our own safety. Before we left, however, we were encouraged by his tale to take part in the first ever RYLA-wide service project in partnership with the Wounded Warriors Project.

After learning about all the good works done by the Wounded Warriors, we wanted to help. So, in lieu of visiting them personally, we wrote letters and made bracelets that would be put in care packages and hand delivered to disabled veterans by official members of the foundation. Some two to three hundred letters were written with the intention of brightening the lives of the men and woman who had endured so much to give us the ability to sleep safely in our beds at night and thank them for putting their lives in danger in the name of their country. The bracelets we made, though we knew that some would be unable to wear them, were meant to remind them that someone out there knows what they've forfeited and is grateful to them.

Not all of RYLA was such a solemn affair. Most of it, in fact, was quite lighthearted and fun. From friendly competition at the RYLA Olympics on Saturday to a demonstration of our enthusiastic but not so impressive dance moves on Sunday, the weekend was an adventure and very exciting. I had so much fun while at RYLA that I didn't realize just how much I'd learned until it was time to come home. I am happy to say that I consider RYLA to have been a catalyst for many positive changes in my life. I am noticeably more outgoing, positive, and enthusiastic

both in school and in the community. RYLA helped me grow both as a person and a leader with major concentration on teamwork and communication.

In furthering my abilities as a leader, RYLA has given me the tools with which I can better spread the message of Rotary and become a more effective member of my Interact Club. I am forever grateful to Rotary for sponsoring me to go to such a life altering event and plan to attend RYLA again next year as a team leader. RYLA has been going strong for almost fifty years now and I hope that it continues for many more to come.