

Governor's Talk

South Portland-Cape Elizabeth, August 15, 2012

Rotary International asked a focus group of Northwestern University students to describe Rotary, and here is what the young people said: *Rotary is a worldwide network of inspired individuals who translate their passions into relevant social causes to change lives in community.*

Rotary International was blown away by this statement, not because they didn't agree with it, but because it definitely does NOT sound like it came out of the PR machine in Evanston. So blown away, in fact, that Rotary made the statement integral to Rotary International's strategic plan. *Rotary is a worldwide network of inspired individuals who translate their passions into relevant social causes to change lives in community.*

Rotarians change lives in part – here comes the commercial -- because our Rotary Foundation is one of the most highly rated, most effective charities in the world. The other reason that Rotary changes lives is that we are a veritable army of 1.2 million volunteers, all committed to making the world a better place. As this year's International President Sakuji Tanaka points out, the work that we do builds peace among peoples around the world. And we need to have peace among people before we can have peace among nations. What we Rotarians do is build peace.

Now, with all this going for Rotary, you would think that people would be beating down our doors to join us. But unfortunately, that's not the case. A decade ago, this District boasted around 2200 members. Today the figure is less than 1800. We're marking a net loss across the District

of about 40 members every year. And it's not that we aren't attracting new members. We are. Since April of this year around 65 new members have signed on across the district. So good folks try us out. But for everyone that comes in, someone else leaves.

These statistics aren't just here in this District, but pretty much hold up across North America. Rotary is growing in Asia which makes up for the losses in the West, but just barely. In fact, when I joined Rotary in 2003 I learned that Rotary has 1.2 million members. And today, Rotary has 1.2 million members. And during those years we've gained 1 million new members – but lost 1 million members.

The statistics show that club members tend to drop out somewhere between six months and maybe three to five years of service. If they stick it out past that, we tend to keep 'em for a good long time. Where we have a problem even getting them in the door in the first place, is with younger professionals. Studies suggest that Gen-Xers and Gen-Yers as a group are especially community oriented. But these young people are finding other outlets for their volunteer efforts, outlets other than Rotary. There are exceptions, of course, but the fact is: If we don't do a much better job attracting and keeping the under-40 crowd, there won't be enough of us left in another generation to talk about it.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a problem.

Speaking for myself, I believe in Rotary. I believe in the person-to-person service that Rotary embodies. I believe in Rotary's ability to enlist ordinary people like me, to go out and do something extraordinary to make the world a better place. I believe in Rotary's humanitarian grants and the power they have to make sustainable change on the ground. I believe in Rotary's scholarship programs, one

of the largest scholarship endowments in the world. I believe that what this crazy world needs a *worldwide network of inspired individuals who translate their passions into relevant social causes to change lives*. I believe that what this world needs is Rotary. And looking about me, I know that you believe in Rotary too.

I have done a lot of thinking on the dichotomy between Rotary's promise and Rotary's growth issues, and what comes home to me is that our world is changing a lot faster than Rotary is changing.

In fact, I would posit that there are actually two Rotarys. One is the Rotary I've been talking about, the Service Above Self Rotary, the Foundation Rotary, the Rotary where we align ourselves with a humanitarian cause, and go out and proactively do something to make this world of ours just a slightly better, more peaceful place.

The other is the weekly meeting Rotary, the Fellowship Rotary, the Rotary where we get together each week over breakfast and listen to a speaker and plan the next fundraiser.

And I think there is a major dichotomy between the two. Don't get me wrong; of course we need fellowship, of course we need to like who we are with and spend time with the people who we work with while we are doing the business of Rotary. But I think that increasingly, our club meetings are not supporting the real work of Rotary.

Think of all the trappings that come with the meeting. A speaker, who may speak on a cogent topic, or may speak on something fairly random that has nothing to do with Rotary. A meal. Which costs money and takes up time away from the family. And which, as much as I love high-cholesterol breakfast, is probably more than most of us eat the other

six days of the week. And our traditions, which definitely have nothing to do with service or humanitarian work. Sergeant-at-arms. Fines. And my personal favorite: Public apologies about missed meetings. Is it any wonder that newcomers sometimes get scared off?

Our vocabulary is also out of synch with what we do. We talk about Rotary *clubs*. I would posit that Rotary is actually a *movement*. We talk about *programs* and *projects*. Which they are, but a better description might be *activism*. We talk about *makeups*. When I visit other club meetings, I don't do it to get a gold star for attendance but for *networking*. (Somebody other than me has pointed out that only in Rotary can you sit next to a professional who bills out at several hundred dollars an hour and just chat.)

The point is this: Being a Rotarian is not about standing to recite the Four-Way Test. That's about being a club member. Being a Rotarian is about using our passion to change lives. Being a Rotarian is about stepping outside ourselves to feed your Passion and, in the process, building peace. And, as many people in this room well know, once you become a Rotarian, feeding your Passion is not a matter of choice. It's what we do.

So what's your Passion? What is it that makes you get up early on a Saturday morning to participate in the service project or the fundraiser or to work with the Interact kids? What is it that makes you put Rotary right up there after work and family as a priority in your life? Or let me put it more directly: What is the Passion that makes the time spent in meetings and, yes, slightly dated traditions, seem worthwhile?

I found my Rotary Passion about six months after I joined the Boothbay Harbor Rotary Club in 2003. To tell the truth, the bad singing and all the

inside jokes were wearying on me, and I wasn't sure I got this Rotary thing. But the speaker that meeting had just come back from building homes for AIDS orphans in Uganda, and a member of our club had gone with him on the trip. Somebody turned down the lights for the slides, and I remember sitting there in the dark with tears running down my cheeks, wondering what kind of wonderful organization Rotary was that could actually make it possible for a person like me – a person with no special skills or training -- to go to Africa and *DO* something tangible for children in such incredible need.

What is your Rotary Passion?

It's a different answer for each of us. For me, yes, since that moment back in 2004 I've been to Africa to do something tangible for the children. In fact I've been twice. I've immunized kids against polio in Nigeria and Mali and Chad, I've fitted amputees with the LN 4 prosthetic hand, I've played with orphans who were once abandoned on the street but are now safe in a group home.

And I've also had been to Guatemala – in fact my husband and I go there every year, so I've had the privilege of watching a community of dump kids grow up with the chance to go to school, to learn their numbers, to use a computer, to work toward the possibility of a good job and a decent life. Late last year Juan Carlos, our sponsor student, graduated from high school and this spring he matriculated at university. He's the first member of his family to even finish primary grades. What he has accomplished is astonishing. But it's not only Juan Carlos or his family but the entire community around him that has changed – when Rotary came in, it brought hope, and as hope entered

in, so has resourcefulness, so has self-confidence. So has entrepreneurship.

And when Hurricane Katrina hit I sat by the television for about a week and watched a city flood, a city that I had learned to love as a young adult. As an American, I felt helpless. But as a Rotarian, I was able to travel to New Orleans and clean up a church and organize a Rotary Foundation Matching Grant and raise the money to rebuild a soup kitchen and in a tangible way let indigent people know that they might have been ignored by the authorities, but they hadn't been forgotten by Rotary. I was able to offer respect and dignity in a community where previously there was none.

And perhaps most meaningful to me of all: During my club's annual Veterans Appreciation Night, I am honored to shake hands with aging veterans and thanked them for their service to this country. And invariably, every time I or a member of my club thanks them for their service and sacrifice, they thank Rotary for inviting them to dinner.

We are Rotarians. We are inspired individuals. We translate our passions into ways that change lives in community.

It doesn't matter what your Passion is – all that matters is that you nourish it – and in exchange it will nourish you. Many of you in this room know exactly what I am talking about because you have found your Passion, and are currently feeding it. And for those of you who haven't discovered your Passion yet, I envy you – because when you do discover it – and you will if you open yourself to the possibility – you are in for the greatest thrill of your life.

You might discover your Passion though a speaker at your club, like I did. You might recognize a Rotary solution to a concern right in your own community or maybe across the world. You might be at a District event, where someone outlines a situation, and you find yourself thinking, “This is something I can do. This is something I *need* to do.” And the cool thing is, Rotary will give you the tools so that the *something* you do is sustainable. So that the *something* you do truly matters.

We are Rotarians. We are inspired individuals.

It’s worth pointing out that all Rotary activism starts at the Club level. Here in this District, the Portsmouth Club began Friends Forever over 25 years ago, and the young people it first served are now middle-aged with teens of their own, and presumably passing along to their own children what they themselves learned about tolerance and acceptance in those far-away days. The Wells Club started Wrap-a-Smile, which today spans every continent in the globe and has touched the lives of 18,000 children. Crutches-for-Africa. Shelter Box. Rotaplast. They all started by one Rotarian in one club.

And that includes the granddaddy of all Rotary Passions. Through Polio Plus, Rotarians over the past 30 years have raised over \$1 billion dollars, immunized over 2 billion children, and are on the verge of wiping away a disease that has crippled and killed millions since the beginnings of history. And it all started because the Malolos Rotary Club in the Philippines came up with a local community project and applied for a Rotary Foundation grant.

All these Rotary projects – projects that cross continents and change thousands – millions – of lives -- all started as the Passion of one

Rotarian. They all started with that Rotarian going to the club board and asking for support for an idea that probably seemed pretty crazy at the time.

And it probably was crazy, because we live in a crazy world. A world in which a very small fraction of the population uses an incredibly high percentage of its resources. Speaking for myself, I'm not any better looking or smarter or more entitled than the mothers I've met in Guatemala who can't afford to send their children to school, or the mothers in Africa who live each day in fear because their children are prey to diseases that were eradicated in the West generations ago, or the mothers in the Philippines who raise their children without decent sanitation or living conditions in shanty communities of 100,000 or more. The only difference between those mothers and me – between those parents and each of us in this room – is that through the luck of our birth and probably a few smart choices along the way we have options that they don't have, including the option to make a difference.

We are Rotarians.

And so, Rotary Club of South Portland-Cape Elizabeth, I offer you a challenge. As you go about the business of Fellowship Rotary, of weekly Club Meeting Rotary, as you adhere to the traditions, my challenge is that that you never forget the reason why we are Rotarians in the first place: It's because we are *inspired individuals who translate our passion to change lives*. It's because we believe that Service is bigger than Self. It's because we believe that Peace will come through that Service.

My wish for you is that you enjoy a lifelong rollercoaster adventure wherever your Rotary Passion leads you, however it consumes you. And

I invite you to never forget that you are far more than a Club member. You are a life changer; you are an instrument of peace. You are a Rotarian.

God bless you.