

MY JOURNEY INTO ROTARY

Why I Joined

All it took was a new town, a sense of purpose – and an invitation

I never expected to be a Rotarian. For years, my idea of networking with the business community was paying my Visa bill. My idea of service was helping an elderly lady with her groceries.

You're welcome, Mom.

Then I wrote a story for The Rotarian on John F. Germ. It was an easy assignment: The 2016-17 president of Rotary International is good company and a generous host with a trove of stories about his life and work. He also has strong opinions about what Rotary does well and what it could do better. Germ took me on a whirlwind tour of Chattanooga, Tenn., his hometown. I was scribbling notes when he asked if I was a Rotarian.

I admitted I wasn't.

"Why not?"

"Nobody ever asked me."

He nodded. "That's one of our problems. We don't ask enough of the right people," he said, "for fear of rejection. We're afraid they'll say no."

I wasn't sure about being one of the right people, but a couple of weeks later an email arrived, inviting me to join Rotary. This was Germ theory in action, turning words into deeds. To paraphrase another business leader known for getting results, he made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

It was a good time to join. My wife and I were moving from New York City to western Massachusetts, where we knew nobody. What better way to get acquainted than through the local Rotary club?

The Rotary Club of Northampton gathers at noon on Mondays in the grand old Hotel Northampton, where the guest list has included the town's former mayor, Calvin Coolidge, who went on to be the 30th president of the United States, as well as Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, the Dalai Lama, Bob Dylan, Richard Nixon, Tom Cruise, and John Mayer. The dining room where the club meets isn't quite so star-studded, but it's congenial. It's where you'll find a dozen or so Rotarians doling mashed potatoes and chicken onto dinner plates, catching up on the weekend's events, listening to a short presentation from this week's speaker, and hoping to make the world a little better before next week's meeting.

For this longtime New Yorker, the good-natured vibe in the room was a refreshing change. The locals hung around to give me directions to libraries and bookstores, tips on restaurants, invitations to lunch or dinner. When I spent a few hours welcoming guests to New Year's Eve performances by local musicians – my first gig as a Rotary volunteer – Club President Dan Shaver took over for me a half-hour early. "Thanks for helping out," he said. "Now go enjoy the music." And he gave me a brownie.

It's enough to make you wonder why everybody doesn't join the club.

Yet membership is still a challenge in many parts of the world. As Rotarians get older, fewer new members fill the ranks. Over time, attrition can shrink or eliminate Rotary clubs. "We lost a club up the road in Williamsburg and another in Hatfield. They basically aged out," says my new friend Phil Sullivan, a longtime Rotarian who recalls when those all-male clubs' members followed rules that sound antique today. "You had to wear a shirt and tie to meetings or you were out. You had to make 90 percent of the meetings or you were out. That stuff wouldn't fly these days. People are so busy you're lucky to get them when you can."

A 2011 survey showed that while Rotary is one of the best-known service organizations in the world, four in 10 people had never heard of it, another four in 10 knew only the name – to them, "Rotary" had perhaps a hazy association with good-deed-doing – and just 20 percent knew something about Rotary's work. Rotary's public image campaigns have since improved awareness, but most people still lack a clear understanding of what Rotary is and what Rotarians do: In 2015, only 41 percent of people surveyed were familiar with Rotary clubs, 12 percent knew about Rotary's work to end polio, and 8 percent were aware of Rotary Peace Centers.

The same survey asked people why they didn't join Rotary. The top three reasons:

"Not enough time."

"I'm worried about the cost."

"Nobody asked me."

In 2011, Rotary International launched a program to strengthen our image, expand public understanding of what Rotary does, and motivate, engage, and inspire current and prospective members. Four years later, global awareness of the organization had jumped from 60 to 75 percent.

So why are members joining today? "Having a sense of purpose" is the most popular reason, followed by making a difference, friendship, and networking. Northampton Club President Shaver's trajectory was typical: "When I moved here four years ago, I didn't know anyone," he says. "I needed to join something, but I was looking for networking with a purpose." Shaver is a chiropractor; he took over a retiring colleague's office space, and the man was a Rotarian who offered to sponsor him. That sounded good to Shaver, who got so involved that he was soon running the 32-member club. "It's more work than I ever expected, and the workload just keeps growing. But so does the fun. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

When Maria Maher moved from Chicago to Annapolis, Md., she looked forward to years of boating on the Chesapeake Bay with her husband, an avid sailor. Then he lost a leg in a motorcycle crash. Looking back, Maher says, “If you want to make God laugh, just tell her your plans.”

After months spent largely in hospitals and rehab centers, Maher wanted to reconnect with the business community. “The Rotary Club of Annapolis was a place to put my skills to use,” says the former vice president and chief of staff to the CEO of the American Medical Association. Sponsored by local legend Charles Heller, she joined and quickly volunteered to help recruit new members.

“We want the club to get younger,” Maher says, and to that end they recently voted to create a new class of membership called Active Under 40, which allows younger members to join at a reduced dues rate. “But young people today are also very time-poor. Jobs and family take up almost every minute. The question is, how can we adapt to the lives they live?”

Maher is now part of the Annapolis club’s membership committee, floating new ideas such as flexible meeting times and ways to attract young parents as members. “For one thing, we’re looking at weekend service projects where younger members might bring their families,” she says. “It might be a chance for children to see their parents giving back to the community. Wouldn’t that help instill Rotary values in the next generation?”

On a recent road trip to Texas, I visited the Rotary Club of Cross Timbers, near Dallas. The hard-charging officers of that club evaluate prospective members by asking, “Do they have the three T’s: talent, time, and treasure?” I like their spirit. For them, Rotary isn’t a 112-year-old bunch of businessmen trying to keep up with the times. It’s the hottest service organization of the future.

What I Saw

On Day One, I get lost in a rotary on my way to Rotary. In most of the world, such a traffic circle is called a “roundabout,” but in New England it’s a “rotary.” I take a wrong way out and wind up east of Westfield.

This is no way to start my undertaking to visit seven Rotary clubs in a week – all of them within an easy drive of Northampton, Mass. Having recently moved from New York City, I’m a newcomer both to the area and to Rotary, and I figure this would be the perfect way to make contacts, learn about the area – and to get a sense of what different Rotary clubs have in common, as well as what makes each one unique.

As long as I don’t get lost.

“Westfield?” a pedestrian says. “Well, first you head back to the rotary ...”

MONDAY, 12:05 p.m.; Westfield, Mass.

I hustle into the Westfield Technical Academy, a vocational high school with a sign out front: “Tiger’s Pride Restaurant.”

Westfield, also known as Whip City, was once the world’s buggy-whip capital. Today the spirited kids at Westfield Tech study information technology, collision technology (don’t call it auto shop), aviation maintenance, and culinary arts. I’m here for the last specialty – the culinary arts students run a full-service restaurant in the auditorium.

“Welcome to Tiger’s Pride,” chirps the freshman who leads me to my table. The menu features baked chicken stuffed with cornbread and sausage, pecan-crusted catfish, pork roast, and a carrot cake I want two pieces of.

A friend had told me not to eat in a high school restaurant. “Would you get your hair cut at a barber college?”

I would if it were Tiger’s Pride Barber College. That’s how good my catfish is.

Almost all 38 members of the Rotary Club of Westfield turn out for the lunch that the high school is hosting for them this week. About half are Rotarians of long standing; the other half are younger, more recent members. “We’re the new blood,” one says.

This club is a foodie’s garden of eatin’. As Tim Flynn, the club’s 2016-17 president, announces a \$1,300 donation to the city’s food pantry that made the local news, John Slattery digs into his lunch. Slattery, a professional chef, pronounces his taste buds “impressed. The asparagus was perfectly cooked, and the flavors in the pork roast were spot-on. These kids are getting great instruction.”

Incoming President Lynn Boscher tells me about the club’s main event: “Our Food Fest in August. We take over the town with food and drink!”

Later, circumnavigating the rotary that threw me off before, I have a thought: This story has a chance to be delicious.

MONDAY, 6 p.m.; Chicopee, Mass.

A town known for foundries that turned out Civil War cannons, Chicopee seems to be made of red brick. The vast Cabotville Mill on the Chicopee Canal, City Hall with its 147-foot clock tower, and Munich Haus, a locally famous rathskeller where the Chicopee Rotary Club convenes once a month – all these buildings are 100-plus years old, as sturdy as the club that has been meeting in the town since 1969.

The club usually meets at a Chinese restaurant. “But once a month we get together here after work to give people who can’t make a noon meeting a chance to join us,” says President Tania Spear, leading me into a red-brick dining room festooned with mounted boars’ heads and a stuffed pheasant.

That kind of flexibility is crucial, says longtime member Lucille Kolish. “We can’t simply wait for people to come through the door.”

Spear runs down a list of club causes: the Sandwich Ministry, a charity that provides meals to people who need them in Chicopee; an upcoming Veterans Appreciation Dinner; and a new freezer for the Chicopee Senior Center. Biggest of all is the annual Celebrity Bartender night, when the mayor and other local luminaries mix drinks for charity. John Arthur rises to his feet. “Madam President,” he says, “we’re gonna raise a whole lot of money that night!”

When dinner comes, Spear offers a typically to-the-point toast: “Enjoy.” Then she hands me a bottle of hand sanitizer. “What do you expect?” she says. “I’m a nurse!”

TUESDAY, 12:15 p.m.; Holyoke, Mass.

If it’s Tuesday, this must be Holyoke. I had checked the club’s home page and was jazzed to see an announcement: Holyoke Rotary Club invites you to its 100th Anniversary Gala! What a party that would be.

Too bad it happened a year ago. Note to club officers worldwide: Update your websites!

But for the Rotarians of Holyoke, “every meeting’s a party,” says the club’s president, Venus Robinson. She welcomes me to a chandeliered conference room where dozens of members and guests chat over poached whitefish, sirloin tips, and elaborate desserts. “I’ve given talks at many Rotary clubs,” says today’s speaker, Barbara Bernard, “and this one has the best lunch!”

“We’re a good-sized club and a happy one,” says Robinson. Happy and competitive. One diner informs me that Holyoke is the birthplace of volleyball. In 1895, YMCA Director William Morgan decided that basketball, invented nearby four years earlier, was too rough for “business leaders” to play. He devised a calmer pastime by combining basketball, handball, and tennis. “And you know what? Hoops started here, too,” my companion confides. “Springfield just claims it.”

Robinson updates the crowd on a \$4,000 donation to The Rotary Foundation, scholarships for local students, and the club’s summer concert series. Introducing me as a visiting Rotarian, she says, “He just joined the club in Northampton,” which brings a good-natured round of boos.

Bernard, the speaker, strides to the podium. “I first addressed this club in 1951 – when I was 23 years old,” says the 89-year-old journalist, who still writes for the Springfield Republican. Closing the meeting, Robinson mentions an absent friend. “He’s here in spirit,” she says. “And to me that counts as attendance.” I think that is a membership rule worth a round of applause.

WEDNESDAY, 12:15 p.m.; Agawam, Mass.

Fun fact: Agawam has one of the lowest ZIP codes in the country: 01001. Colonist William Pynchon bought the land from the Agawam tribe in 1636 for a wagonload of coats, hatchets, hoes, knives, and “18 fathom of wampum,” the beads Native Americans used as currency.

The Rotary club meets in a Colonial-era tavern where I find a dozen local leaders adding their own twist to The Four-Way Test. After “Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?” they say: “Five: Will it be fun?”

“That’s our new wrinkle,” says insurance agent John Weiss. “We’re for doing good and having a good time.”

“Service with a smile,” says his colleague Joe Clark. Clark, 32, is renovating the club’s Facebook page. “Who else?” he says. “I’m the one who can find the power button on a Mac.”

The club donates \$200 to End Polio Now. Sara Chaffee reports on a donation of 150 backpacks to grade school children. “We said they’d won a contest, so they wouldn’t be teased for taking charity,” she tells me. “There was one boy I’ll never forget. He ran around hugging his, saying, ‘My first backpack!’ ”

Next comes news of a program named in honor of Charlie Heyl, a past club president and former industrial arts (don’t call it shop) teacher at Agawam High. “Lots of Rotary clubs sponsor academic scholarships, and that’s great,” says Rosemary Sandlin, a former Massachusetts state representative. “We like vocational students, too. One of our scholarships went to a welder. We sent a student to cosmetology school and helped a middle-age mom become a dental hygienist.”

I’ve found my favorite project so far.

THURSDAY, noon; Amherst, Mass.

The Rotary Club of Amherst meets less than a mile from Emily Dickinson’s home. The Belle of Amherst, as she’s known, liked luncheons. Especially desserts. She wrote drafts of poems on the back of cake recipes. She is reported to have said: “People must have puddings.”

The Amherst club is all about tradition. And dessert. “We’re famous for our chocolate chip cookies,” says President Sue Clark, pointing me to a cookie the size of a hubcap.

“I could never finish one,” I say, finishing two.

“Tradition! I’m for it,” says Bill Gillen. An architect in a blue blazer and bow tie, Gillen recalled when Rotary meetings were “more formal – everyone wore jackets and ties.” And while some Rotarians roll their eyes at singing, Gillen croons “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” with relish worthy of a ballpark frank. “Singing loosens you up!” he says.

Clark rings the brass bell of Amherst to open the meeting. An insurance executive who relaxes by baking, Emily Dickinson-style, she gets a round of cheers for the club’s recent donation of \$50,000 to the Hitchcock Center for the Environment, which promotes green causes. She then reports on the annual auction, carried live on local TV. “We raised \$25,000,” says Clark. “Let’s do even better next time.”

THURSDAY, 7 p.m.; Northampton, Mass.

My home club's auction is not next year or later this year. It is tonight! Rotary Club of Northampton President Dan Shaver has done the heavy lifting: renting the Grand Ballroom at the historic Hotel Northampton, hiring an auctioneer, negotiating with caterers, assigning club members to our battle stations.

The art includes Warhol prints, LeRoy Neiman pastels, several Norman Rockwells, and a weirdly memorable hologram of Johnny Damon. (Attention, Red Sox fans: His eyes follow you!) Best of all, perhaps, is a pop-art canvas displayed on an easel. "A remarkable work by Peter Max," auctioneer Richard Brandwein calls it. "We will start the bidding at \$2,450."

A photograph of Arnold Palmer and Jackie Gleason playing golf sells for \$150. An Ansel Adams photograph of a tree, billed by Brandwein as "one of 600 on earth," goes for \$175. A splashy Neiman fetches \$650. Hours later, Shaver tallies the totals. Our three-hour auction has grossed about \$8,000. Everyone had a great time and we raised some money for our charities – that's what I call a successful evening.

FRIDAY, noon; Springfield, Mass.

I can't wait to get to Springfield. It was here that James Naismith nailed a pair of peach baskets to the wall of the local YMCA in 1891. Final score of the first basketball game: 1-0.

The Rotary Club of Springfield meets at the National Basketball Hall of Fame at the base of the atrium, which is shaped like a giant basketball.

Longtime member Rowland Hawthorne – a distant relative of writer Nathaniel Hawthorne – opens the festivities with this week's quiz about the content of the March issue of *The Rotarian*. "The Rotary International president-elect is a native of Australia," he says. "What is the name of his home club?"

Interrupting their lunch of salmon, salad, pasta, and prime rib – the best of the week – Springfield's Rotarians guess: Sydney. No? Melbourne? No again. Someone suggests the Outback Steakhouse.

"Sandringham!" says Hawthorne, collecting a dollar from everyone who answered wrong.

"I make my questions tough," he tells me, "so we raise a little more for our causes."

Springfield Rotarians are pragmatic. They're all about results. "This is my favorite speaking gig," says guest speaker Mike Abramson, assistant general manager of minor league baseball's Hartford Yard Goats. "You get a welcome from people of influence."

Incoming President Lamont Clemons presides over Springfield's go-getters. Clemons, 39, has the firm handshake and eye contact of a born business leader. He rose from what he calls "humble beginnings" to business success. When an acquaintance invited him to a Rotary lunch, he says, "I was curious." He had heard that Rotary was for people who are old and white, neither of which he is. "But I went, and I liked the vibe. The warmth. The connections to people who can help our community." Now he has Rotary connections all over town. "Friends, I call them," he says.

He has helped lead the club's effort to refine its web presence and diversify its membership. "A big part of Rotary's mission is to reach a younger generation," he tells me. "Diversity's important. We're a 68-member club with some minority presence, some Latino presence. But we're just getting started."

Ringling the brass bell, he says, "So let's go."

SATURDAY, Northampton, Mass.

Five workdays, seven towns, and 147 miles on the odometer later, my Rotary ramble is over. To stave off withdrawal, I drive to Rotary Liquors, near the tricky traffic circle. Soon I'm hoisting a Massachusetts-brewed Samuel Adams to the student chefs at Westfield Tech, to Chicopee's underdog energy, to the gung-ho gang in Holyoke, the "Is it fun?" crew in Agawam, to busy Amherst with its 19th-century traditions and killer cookies, and to Springfield's forward-looking Fridays, which could only be improved if they let visiting Rotarians shoot three-pointers in the Basketball Hall of Fame.

I've got a stack of business cards from people I met last week. Friends, I call them. They'll be hearing from me.