

Picking a Partner





Photo by Michelle Termaat-McGrath

A community service organization strengthens student leadership skills.

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The dynamics of society have changed as we enter the second decade of the 21st Century. To survive, leaders both young and old need essential leadership skills to assume the complex responsibilities facing them and, more importantly, to work collectively. However, there is much research that indicates that students lack the leadership skills needed to meet those demands. A study conducted by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills found that leadership skills—such as communication, time management, critical thinking, problem solving, personal accountability, ethical decision making, and the ability to work effectively with others—are the areas in which young people are least prepared (Casner-Lotto, 2006).

The urgency of youth leadership development has never been more apparent. However, it is necessary for business leaders to work in collaboration with educational leaders to address such development. In Wisconsin, business leaders have embraced this collaboration and developed a way to prepare their young people for success.

The Rotary Club motto is “service above self” and in Wisconsin, the Madison Downtown Rotary Club believes that service begins with its youth. The Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RYLA) program is conducted around the world and seeks to provide young adults, ages 14–30, with an opportunity to develop their skills and character while introducing them to Rotarian values of service, high ethical standards, and peace. In District 6250, District Governor Charles Hanson and RYLA Chair Jeff Odom approach youth leadership development as urgent and essential.

Hanson and Odom brought business and educational leaders together, including the Wisconsin Association of School Councils (WASC)—experts in youth leadership development—to spearhead the development of a three-day leadership development program. The exceptional leadership programming of RYLA combined with encouragement from Hanson and Odom provides an experience unmatched by other youth leadership development efforts.

In its first year, RYLA more than doubled its enrollment and was described by participants as “life changing” and “the best leadership experience they’ve ever had.” The curriculum centers around the core values of Rotary International, including the fundamentals of leadership, ethical decision making, effective communication skills, problem solving, conflict management, the fundamentals of Rotary, and building self-confidence and self-esteem.

Students participating in a low ropes course during the RYLA Camp.



The weekend retreat incorporates team building, service, and mentorship—all important characteristics in an effective youth development program.



For this program, high school student leaders are selected by their local Rotary clubs and sent as ambassadors of their communities.

They represent all facets of the school community and create a diverse mix of students. Students are placed in teams of 12–15, each one from a different city statewide. Throughout the camp, these teams work collaboratively to learn key leadership and team-building skills, create a sense of community, and embrace the values of Rotary. The weekend retreat incorporates team building, service, and mentorship—all important characteristics in an effective youth development program.

Lerner (2004) defined effective youth leadership development programs as including three key components: life-skill building activities; participation in community service activities; and sustained, positive adult-youth relations. These components are also included in RYLA.

Students provide service throughout the weekend. They write letters to service men and women thanking them for their efforts abroad. They also take on responsibilities during mealtimes, including serving and cleaning up. Rotarians begin each meal with a “service above self” message, sharing intimate stories of their service around the globe to others less fortunate.

The adult-youth mentoring component is a top priority for the program. Students are divided into small teams of 12 students and are assigned a junior counselor (WASC-trained leadership facilitator), a former RYLA participant, and an adult counselor who is a business leader and Rotarian. Having a Rotarian on each team provides business leaders an opportunity to mentor promising young leaders serving their own communities, not to mention serve as a resource for participants on the path to becoming professional and community leaders.

Matt Boshcka, a small business owner and Rotarian from LaCrosse, WI, described his experience as a Rotarian counselor at the program.

Every generation needs leaders and for groups of determined, motivated individuals to step up and provide direction to these young people. Rotarians in District 6250 are doing just that. This camp helped the students sharpen their skills, and I’m confident they will take their newly learned leadership and team-building knowledge and apply it in their communities,” he said.

Nancy Jo Schindler, another Rotarian counselor from Menomonie, WI, shared this:

The students attending had preconceived ideas of what a ‘leader’ looked like and acted like. When I was introduced as their counselor, the looks I got were priceless. Here was their counselor—happy, overweight, old, and handicapped. What transpired between all of us was absolutely amazing. We all learned what preconceived ideas can do to hinder a team. These students are our leaders of tomorrow and need to know that their ideas and skills are just as valuable as the people in business today. They learned this at camp. I wish I could bottle the companionship, skills, and teamwork that I saw at RYLA. I told everyone in my Rotary Club they all need to experience RYLA. It’s a once in a lifetime event. I can’t wait to go back.

Hanson stated in his address to the RYLA delegates, “Our society desperately needs strong, effective, ethical leaders in all walks of life. We need leaders who understand the importance of providing service to others, promoting integrity, and advancing world understanding, goodwill, and peace. We see you as future leaders and we want to partner with you and help you develop the necessary skills for success in any way we can.”

The members of District 6250 are now working with other Districts to create a RYLA program for middle-school students, and eventually college-age students. As a leadership development consultant and a Rotarian, it was an honor not only to be a part of the program, but also to see firsthand, the power in such a partnership. To learn more about a RYLA program near you, visit <http://rotary.org/en/studentsandyouth/pages/ridefault.aspx> ■

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