

25 YEARS – THAT IS A LONG TIME

June 20, 1994 what was my life at that time?

My consulting business, Sennett & Associates, focusing on human resources, was in its 10th year and going strong. We filled a need for small to mid-size clients who were required to comply with labor laws but who were not large enough to justify an in-house HR staff. There were numerous employee handbooks to write, employee relations issues to resolve, supervisory training to conduct, compensation programs to develop, and workers to recruit. There was compliance with FLSA, COBRA, DOT, OSHA and the newly enacted FMLA – all requiring written policies and training.

On the home front, life was good. Daughter, Michele, and son, Jeff, were starting their own lives. Jim and I had moved into that stage of enjoying our life together by taking interesting vacations to places like Bermuda, cruises to the Bahamas, trips out West, lazy excursions along the East Coast, evening rides on Jim's motorcycle and trips with adult friends instead of with children.

I was active at church, i served two terms on the Chamber of Commerce Board including as Vice Chair, and was active with the local Hanover Area Human Resources Association serving as President.

Then one day, fellow Chamber Board Member, Norm Wells, invited me to a Rotary meeting. Like most folks, i did not know much about Rotary, but i admired Norm and, therefore, said I would attend a luncheon. Much to my surprise, there were numerous Rotarian members whom I knew and respected in the community. And there were a couple of women – including Chris Neri. Women were still new to Rotary, having been accepted into the organization in 1989. I felt amongst friends and professional peers and began to learn what it meant to be a Rotarian. I served on the Board for 5 years and as your Club President in 2002/03.

During the following years, Rotary opened unbelievable doors for me.

At a district meeting in 2003, I learned there would be a medical mission trip to Ethiopia and more people were needed for the team. Business commitments prevented me from volunteering, but my husband Jim was eager. Ethiopia was an experience that opened our eyes and minds to other cultures. Ethiopia has 70 million people in a country twice the size of Texas. Life expectancy is only 41. Only ½ of the people can read or write. Outside of Jim's hotel window a large family lived in a cardboard lean too. There was no infrastructure and people relieved themselves on the side of the road.

- Jim volunteered in the eye clinic and conducted testing to evaluate cataracts and other eye problems. One elderly toothless Ethiopian woman sat across from Jim – up close because he was examining her eyes; when her hand slid up his thigh and she gave him a rather seductive, toothless grin. Dr. Amy Spotts was next to Jim and he asked Amy what she thought was going on. Amy replied, "Jim, i think she is proposing".
- Over the next several years both Jim and I had the opportunity to participate in Rotary medical missions to Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and Mexico.
- In Peru I worked in squatter villages in the hills above Lima where indigenous people come to live in order to work in the city. They scrape a section of barren land on a hill side, start with a few sheets of plywood and save until they can construct a one-room cinder block home with no running water.

- In Brazil a local chief asked volunteers to walk to his village to administer the polio vaccine. After a long trek the Rotarians arrived at a small village with a central hut where -- human shrunken heads adorned the walls. We were told this was a method to honor deceased loved ones, and not a savage act against an enemy. However, they did declare that they no longer practice this method of adoration.

In 1996 Jim and I began to host international professionals through the Rotary Group Study Exchange Program. Our District would develop a team of 5, with a Rotarian team leader and 4 non-Rotarian young professionals who would experience a month-long trip to another country for professional and cultural immersion. We would send a team to that partnering country and they would develop a team to send to our district.

- My first hosting experience in my home was France, followed by Germany, Brazil, Italy, Greece, India, Japan, and England.
- In 2005 i was selected as the Team Leader for Denmark, spending 5 weeks in the Jutland area. Upon return from Denmark, I assumed the role of District Chair for the GSE program and went on to form partnerships and exchanges with Mexico, India, Brazil, Germany, Denmark, Lithuania, Singapore, Malaysia, Pakistan, Scotland, Argentina, Czech and Slovak Republics, Australia, and our last with Taiwan in 2017.
- Rotary International has ceased to support the GSE program, but for those of us who were involved, we know first-hand there was no better means for developing international understanding and goodwill. I developed long-lasting friendships with many of my GSE contacts in England, Germany, Denmark, Brazil and Taiwan. Following the GSE tours I have visited these international friends in their countries and they have returned to the U.S. to spend more time with me.

In 2005, following Hurricane Katrina, Jim and I volunteered with the Red Cross. We were deployed to Baton Rouge LA where we spent three weeks distributing supplies and interviewing victims for available services. Based on that experience, I started the non-profit Joining Hands in Disaster Response. For twelve years we adopted homes and families, raised donor dollars and gathered volunteers to assist victims of natural disasters occurring in the U.S. It wasn't long before our Rotary District partnered with Joining Hands. If it wasn't for Rotary's support with leadership, crew chiefs, donations, grants and volunteers, Joining Hands would not have succeeded for so long.

- During those 12 years we sent teams to Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Georgia, New Jersey, North Carolina and Maryland. We raised close to a .5 million dollars, gathered 505 volunteers representing 38,120 volunteer hours for 73 weeks of work. Joining hands was responsible for the total construction of 3 new homes and the restoration of 15 homes that were severely damaged. And again, Rotarians throughout this district and beyond have become special friends through our efforts to restore the homes and lives of others.
- Staying in volunteer housing, usually a church, volunteers enjoyed countless conversations and delicious meals following long hours in the field. We slept on sanctuary floors and in bunk beds and showered in portable shower trucks. There were many funny experiences that still make me laugh and hardships that can still bring a tear to my eye.
- As many of us have reached an age requiring us to hang up our hammers and tool belts, we closed the door on Joining Hands. But I am blessed to know that many victims of hurricanes and floods are eternally grateful for the generosity of the Joining Hands volunteers.

When people ask, “What does rotary mean to me?”, my answer is always pretty simple -- I have gotten far more from Rotary than I have given.

All of these opportunities from Medical Missions to Group Study Exchange to Joining Hands would not have happened if it wasn't for Rotary.

I'm not a millionaire or a person of influence – I could not have achieved any of this on my own.

- To change the world
- ✓ It takes the support of Rotary friends,
- ✓ The sharing of Rotarian skill and knowledge,
- ✓ The donation of individual dollars directly or through the Rotary Foundation.

It takes the Rotary family. And for that I am eternally appreciative for the opportunity to be a Rotarian.

Thank you for this opportunity to reflect on my 25 years.

Peg Sennett