

THE HISTORY OF RYLA IN DISTRICT 5830

In 1995, District Governor John Childs approached Tyler Rotarian Guy Martin about learning everything possible about a Rotary youth program called Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RYLA) in early 1996, Martin formed a partnership between Rotary, the area boy scout council, and challenging outdoor personal experience (COPE) and then held the first RYLA camp at the 700 acre George Pirtle Boy Scout camp. The camp was centrally located near Carthage, Texas and was well-equipped with tents, cots, mess hall, and a well-designed ropes course.

From the beginning, it was understood that Rotary would take the lead in administering the annual camp and the mission would be to develop leadership skills in high school juniors from Rotary district 5830 clubs in East Texas and southeastern Oklahoma. Primarily, the leadership skills prioritized would be communications, decision making, self-esteem, problem solving, trust, teamwork, and planning. In 2017, integrity was added to the list after the first year of the camp, a RYLA committee was elected among the 5830 RYLA leaders and by laws were adopted.

The first camp was held in the early spring of 1996 and included 72 campers from the 46 clubs in the district. Rotary had decided that the camps would be co-ed and each club would be guaranteed one boy and one girl in the camp, with the larger clubs being allowed more than two campers through expanding to various high schools in their area.

In only a few years, the camp became a phenomenal success with 100 campers and 30 Rotarians and several non-Rotarians, as well. There have been no paid workers in the program since the beginning. In 1999, leaders realized that an annual training camp would greatly enhance the Rotarians' ability to stay current in their training, so, a training camp two weeks before the regular camp became an annual event. In 2001, it was decided to choose several outstanding campers each year to invite back the next year as facilitators to the team leaders. That program became an immediate success and has produced leaders for future camps.

Following the camp in 2002, team leaders and RYLA committee members were invited to meet at the La Finca Mexican restaurant in Gilmer to discuss the pros and cons of the camp just completed. Ideas for improvement were abundant and "rehash" became an annual event. Ideas like "aircraft controller", various enhancements to the camp site, and attracting speaking experts like Tim Reger (mind reader) were adopted.

In 2003, the camp had become so popular the number of campers had increased to 130 or more, so it was obvious that the camp was maxed out and it was imperative that the RYLA committee schedule an additional camp. Clubs were divided into north zone and south zone and, in 2004, a program of training camp, two RYLA camps, then followed with rehash was initiated. An innovative new program called "AO's" was formed in 2007; this was a group of college freshmen and former RYLA'ians, who volunteered and were chosen to serve to set up camps and to clean up camps during and after each session, eliminating a substantial amount of work from the administrative staff.

2015 was a big year for 5830 RYLA, because the RYLA committee decided to move the camps to Clements Scout Ranch in Athens, Texas. After 19 years of sleeping in tents, campers would now stay in heated cabins, which has been an added benefit to the camp.

In 2016, Ridley Briggs brought a proposed "RYLA creed" to rehash that creed was adopted by the RYLA committee and has continued to be a vital part of the RYLA program. The creed can be seen on the official RYLA website at RYLA5830.com

In 2021, due to Covid restrictions, RYLA was held virtually, with campers and leaders meeting in multiple separate locations. All were connected through a Zoom-style meeting platform. Teams were formed as always, and leaders led the campers through challenges and team building exercises.

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Since the bylaws require that the officers of the RYLA committee are District 5830 Rotarians, the district's first and only (so far) e-club, Leaders in Service Rotary club, was sponsored by Longview (Greggton) Rotary. This enabled long-time leaders and members of the administration team to join the District 5830 RYLA committee.

In person RYLA resumed in 2022. In 2023, the committee chose to reduce the number of campers per session to maximize the resources and experience.

Now, in 2024, there have been "second generation" RYLArians-campers that are the children of past District 5830 RYLA campers. Through the leadership of the current RYLA committee and administration team, RYLA continues to share information about Rotary international, Rotary District 5830 and the clubs that send campers each year.

We thank every club in district 5830 for your support!