

# DIAMOND ANNIVERSARY

## Rotary Club of Rockford Celebrates 75 Years

### Early Beginnings

Rotary Club was founded by Paul J. Harris on February 23, 1905 in Chicago, Illinois. According to the official website, his idea was, "so professionals with diverse backgrounds could exchange ideas, form meaningful, lifelong friendships, and give back to their communities." It took until May 21, 1948 for a Rotary Club to form in Rockford. Its first president, Erwin J. Kleinert, led the all-male group and followed the Rotary motto of, "Service Above Self." Since that time the Rotary Club of Rockford has served both internationally and in our local community. Keeping pace with the times, ladies were allowed to join by Rotary International in 1989. The Rotary Club of Rockford is currently 34 members strong and are still making an impact with their good deeds 75 years after the Club's inception.

### Scenes Around Town

There are plenty of nods to the Rotary Club in downtown Rockford, including the most noticeable, the Rotary Pavilion. Although it has gone through a number of renovations (including the current one) it has always been a popular gathering place for the community. It has hosted a variety of events ranging from garden shows to dancing exhibitions. A sure draw, Santa Claus and his reindeer are annual guests during the Christmas holiday season. If you have a keen eye, you can see the fishing line containers on the banks of the Rogue provided by the Club. Young readers know to keep a lookout for Rotary Little Libraries where they can pick up a book and enjoy a new world through reading. There is one in front of Herman's Boy and one at Meadow Ridge Elementary. The Club also helped fund the gorgeous stage at Garden Club Park, the venue for the Rogue River Blues Series and Open Mic Night. The Rotary Club also collaborated with the local Jaycees to bring a park to area children in the downtown area, off of S. Fremont St. Now that the Jaycees have disbanded, the park is called Rotary Park.

### Collaboration is Key

Just like joining forces with the Jaycees for the park, the Rotary Club is known to collaborate and help with many different programs and organizations. Last year was the inaugural Rotary Rocks for ShelterBox Music Festival. They are the charter organization for Boy Scouts of America Troop 8228, an all-girls Scout troop, internationally they helped with water wells for the Dominican Republic, they collaborated with a Club in Florida (via Sue and Jim Bodenner), and a Club in Seattle, Washington (via Ramona Hinton) for a library in Haiti, sponsored RHS Interact Club and helped three RHS students go to El Salvador with Interact Clubs representing West Michigan to build housing, even sponsoring the house build for a



Part of the Club of Rockford Rotarians at Christmas (L-R): Ted Sees, Jon Loux, Jerry Coon, Greg Glover, Erik Luxhoj, Kelly McLellan, Neil Blakeslee, Brian McNamara, Mike Martin, Jim Tol, Bill Knape, Jason Parker, and Floyd Havemeier. (Courtesy Photo)



The Rotary duck race has been renamed the Jim Tol Memorial Big Daddy Duck Race, paying tribute to the former Rotarian who passed away April 18, 2023. (Courtesy Photo)

\$3,500 cost. They are also involved in the Students Take a Renewed Interest in the Value of Education program (STRIVE) – partnering with the school to aid students at risk of not graduating by providing mentors through high school and with their careers after graduation. The club has either initiated or collaborated with beloved programs such as Shop with a Hero (formerly Shop with a Cop), Sweetheart Splash, and Reading Rocks in Rockford, which was started in 2014 by Rotarian Sue Bodenner.

### Passing the Event Baton

The goal for the Club is to identify a need in the community and then start an initiative, whether it be an event or a fundraiser. The hope is to initiate the event, make it a strong piece of the fabric of Rockford assuring its success, and then passing it on to another organization or two that will benefit from it. A perfect example of this is Reading Rocks, which is now overseen by the school system and the library. To this day, the Club has given away 1,000s of books to avid readers at Reading Rocks.



Always promoting reading, the Rotary Club of Rockford established Little Libraries around town, like this one in front of Herman's Boy. (Courtesy Photo)



Reading Rocks in Rockford has provided thousands of books to area children in the hopes of promoting literacy. (Courtesy Photo)





On your mark, get set...fans gather and watch as members of the Rotary Club of Rockford let the decorated rubber ducks go at the Rockford Dam during the 2022 Start of Summer Celebration. The event is one of the Club's most popular fundraisers of the year. (Courtesy Photo)

*All Their Ducks in a Row – and Chickens*  
It is no secret the Rotary Club's Chicken Barbeque has been a beloved staple during Harvest Festival for many years. The mouthwatering morsels and all the fixings have made plenty of people happy for a long time. It is one of the Rotary Club's premier fundraising events.

And it would be remiss not to mention the one of the biggest fundraisers of them all – the Big Daddy Duck Race. Although this year it has found a new name, the Jim Tol Memorial Big Daddy Duck Race, paying tribute to the former Rotarian who sadly passed away April 18 of this year after a long battle with cancer.

What many people don't know is the duck race actually started as a log race by Floyd Havemeier during Start of Summer to pay tribute to the logging industry, which was important on the Rogue River. Rotarians, led by Floyd, cut pieces of log to race downstream. Unfortunately, this was regulated by the State Gaming Commission and it required the logs to be the same size. Enter the ducks in the late 90s– small ducks that were dumped into the river by a front loader. Talk about an evolution! In 2012, Sue Bodenner suggested 10-inch ducks as a trial run, of which 22 were sold that first year.

Word has it that the duck race was stuck at only about 50 ducks for subsequent years until Jim Tol and Erik Luxhoj worked to increase the number, and increase it they did! This year's goal is 300 ducks, and the Club is currently sitting at 295. Businesses and families can pay just \$100 for a duck to decorate and enter their adorable entry into the duck race June 10th at 5 p.m. at the dam. Brag-

ging rights go to the winner and all the proceeds go back into Rotary projects.

#### *Well-deserved Tribute*

If that group of businessmen in 1948 hadn't started the Club, there is no doubt the landscape - and history - of Rockford would be very different. The impact the group has had not only at home, but abroad is immeasurable. That dedication even earned the Club a Mayoral Proclamation at the last City Council Meeting.

Jerry Coon, who has been a Rotarian since the 1990s, currently serves as president of the Club. He has watched, and been a part of, many good deeds throughout the years. His current role has added a new perspective for him.

"As the president, I see how dedicated the people are who are members," he shares. "Most of them are working full time and this is an add-on to what time they have outside of that. They are always available for night and weekend events. I remember when I was working it was hard to carve out time, but it was so important. The members show that, they demonstrate they live the 'Service Above Self' motto."

He continues, "As a whole, the Rockford Club epitomizes the Rotary motto. It really does show as you look back at the history of what has been done, and what is still being accomplished. It is our hope that in another 75 years people will look back at us the same way we are looking now and say, 'they have really made a difference,' and we will have a place in history. And our hope is going forward, there is another group of people who will end up doing wonderful things, so they can serve the community in the future. It is the Rotarian way."



Speaking of ducks...The Rotary Club's Pluck a Duck is a popular event for youngsters. (Courtesy Photo)

The Club will be celebrating its 75-year anniversary with a President's Gala and Alumni Social on June 20th at the Community Cabin. This event is for all those who are serving, or have served, as a Rotarian. Community members should keep an

eye out for a public event, which will be held aptly at the Rotary Pavilion later this summer so everyone can celebrate all the accomplishments that have been brought to Rockford through the efforts of this special Club as they give "Service Above Self."