

Tracing the Roots of Group Study Exchange (G.S.E.)

by D7080 Past Governor, Douglas W Vincent for the ROTI Institute

“I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples,” is a quote attributed to the famous humanitarian, Mother Teresa. No other statement could so aptly describe the impact a Rotary Group Study Exchange (G.S.E.) experience can have on one’s self, family, friends, and colleagues.

In fact, the over 50 year ‘ripple effect’ of Rotary’s G.S.E. program has resulted in a tidal wave of loving and ongoing friendships, resulting in goodwill, improved world understanding and peace. One does not have to travel far in any community to find examples of someone touched by Rotary through this area of International Service. Many participants have personally grown and developed into industry, community and political leaders.

My personal introduction to Rotary came in 1977 when a local Rotarian from Galt, Ontario, Robert Lovett, invited me to apply for a G.S.E. As a result of his simple phone call and a successful application, I traveled as a team member to Western Australia, where District 945 Rotarians helped make the Rotary spark come alive. Little did that member know back then that he was casting a stone across the water to create a ripple effect that would replicate and grow over the next 30 years.

Few Rotarians are aware that seeds for the original G.S.E. concept were sown as far back as 1950 in Auckland, New

Zealand. The idea of an exchange for business and professional people was first born during February and March of that year when Rotarians in the area hosted a group of six young men from Yorkshire (England), led by Dr. Geoff Morton. Eventually this exchange became a pattern for a similar one in 1956, which became a pilot program known as ROTA (Rotary Overseas Travel Award).

One Rotarian who has followed the development and growth of G.S.E. through the years is PDG Ronald Thomas (95/96) of D9920 in Auckland, NZ, who, along with his father and uncles, were involved right from the start. In fact, Ron is the sixth District Governor to come from his family tree and it was a special pleasure to visit him and his wife, Denise at a dinner in their home, tracing the roots of this great program.

While reviewing the early stages of what would eventually become G.S.E., it was interesting to read the history and hear how, as a young boy, Thomas would overhear the Rotary committee meetings hosted by his father in their home. The ROTA idea was originally put forward in 1955 by Dr. Ralph Vernon as the District (39) project for Rotary’s (50th) Golden Anniversary year.

The exchange idea was patterned along the lines of the previous one in 1950 and actually took place in September of 1956 when six team



members, lead by John Ledgerwood, traveled to Great Britain for a two-month excursion.

Rotarians liked and supported the program because it brought Rotary into contact with younger groups of people, including the Junior Chamber of Commerce, Young Farmers' Clubs and Senior Secondary School students. Each member in the district contributed \$2. that year to fund the project.

Following this second successful exchange experience, the District continued with the project over the next few years with the same financial arrangements. Exchanges were made with USA, Canada, India, Ceylon, Malaysia, Thailand Japan and Pakistan. Since then, the district has been involved pioneering special exchanges such as an all female team from the U.S. and the first District to have a G.S.E. with Korea, lead by PDG David Oakley.

Rotarian John Craig was part of the committee that created ROTA in 1955 and he worked on developing the exchange guidelines and details. He was District Governor in 1959/1960 when Harold Thomas, Ron's uncle, was Rotary International President. Presumably through this connection, word of the successful ROTA project reached the headquarters office and other Rotary districts around the world.

By 1963 the program was submitted to Rotary Foundation for consideration to conduct world wide exchanges. It was supported by the Rotary Foundation Trustees and Past R.I. President Harold Thomas from N.Z. Subsequently, Rotarians John Craig and Ralph Vernon,

prime architects of the program in Auckland, assisted Evanston staff to design the "Exchanges of Study Groups" program which received final approval from the Foundation Trustees and R.I. Board of Directors in January 1964.

Since then, the name has been streamlined to G.S.E. (Group Study Exchange) and the program has had various policy and procedure refinements through the years. One thing that has not changed, however, is the overall purpose

of helping improve world understanding through exchange visits of outstanding business

professionals to develop good will and peace for the benefit of all mankind. This ripple effect grows and improves the world, one friendship at a time.

Like those above, many Rotarians have unknowingly cast stones upon the water through the years, causing ripples. And, like many G.S.E. participants, I became a Rotarian and got involved in club activities and district committees. Eventually, several years later, I had more good fortune and participated in a second G.S.E., as Team Leader to the Philippines.

Little did those few Rotarians know, back in 1950, that many lives would be changed and improved around the world as a result of their activities then. Once again, evidence that one person or one idea, really can make a difference.

And . . . what about you?

Have you cast a stone. . .

or felt the ripple?

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"G.S.E. helps make the world a better place to live, one friendship at a time!"