

Marty Peak Helman

Rotary District 7780

Governor 2012-13

martyrotary@gmail.com

all rights reserved

Rotary International asked a focus group of Northwestern University students what they knew about Rotary, and the answers suggested that Rotary was a bunch of grey-haired guys sitting around eating. Then Rotary International told the young people what Rotary actually accomplishes, and asked them to use their own words to describe Rotary, and here is what the young people said: *Rotary is a worldwide network of inspired individuals who translate their passions into relevant social causes to change lives in community.*

The marketing people who organized the focus group were blown away by this statement, because it definitely does NOT sound like it came out of the PR machine in Evanston. So blown away, in fact, that in course of time the words showed up on a slide that was presented to the RI Board of Directors, and eventually, the words became integral to Rotary International's strategic plan. And if you go to the rotary.org website, and in the search field you scribe the words, "strategic plan," up will pop a blue graphic, in the center of which you will read these words: *Rotary is a worldwide network of inspired individuals who translate their passions into relevant social causes to change lives in community.*

Rotarians change lives in part – here comes the commercial -- because our Rotary Foundation is one of the most highly rated, most effective charities in the world. Check out The Rotary Foundation on Charity Navigator or any other independent organization. You'll be impressed by what you read. But forget statistics; I can prove to you The Rotary Foundation's impressive standing with just one anecdote:

Imagine for a moment that you are Bill Gates. You control billions of dollars. You can probably pick up the phone and speak directly to the Pope, for all I know. And you decide that you want to do something about polio. So what do you do? Do you call the CDC or the WHO? Do you call downstairs to your own Foundation? No, you write a check to The Rotary Foundation. I rest my case.

The other reason that Rotary changes lives is that we are a veritable army of 1.2 million volunteers, all committed to making the world a better place. As this year's International President Sakuji Tanaka points out, the work that we do builds peace among peoples around the world. And we need to have peace among people before we can have peace among nations. We Rotarians build peace.

Now, with all this going for Rotary, you would think that people would be beating down our doors to join us. But unfortunately, that's not the case. A decade ago, this District boasted around 2200 members. Today the figure is less than 1800. We're marking a net loss across the District of about 40 members every year. And it's not that we aren't attracting new members. We are. In the past three months around 40 new members have signed on. So good folks try us out. But for everyone that comes in, someone else leaves.

These statistics aren't just here in New England, but pretty much hold up across North America. Rotary is growing in Asia which makes up for the losses in the West, but just barely. When I joined Rotary in 2003, one of the first factoids I learned is that Rotary has 1.2 million members. Today, Rotary has 1.2 million members. And during those years we've gained 1 million new members – but lost 1 million members. That's 100 thousand members that are joining and leaving us, every year.

The statistics show that club members tend to drop out somewhere between six months and maybe three to five years of service. If they stick it out past that, we tend to keep 'em for a good long time.

Where we have a problem even getting them in the door in the first place, is with younger professionals. Studies suggest that Gen-Xers and Gen-Yers as a group are especially community oriented. But these young people are finding other outlets for their volunteer efforts, outlets other than Rotary. There are exceptions, of course, but the reality is: If we don't do a much better job attracting and keeping the under-40 crowd, there won't be enough of us left in another generation to talk about it.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a problem.

I have done a lot of thinking on the dichotomy between Rotary's promise and Rotary's growth issues, and what comes home to me is that our world is changing a lot faster than Rotary is changing. In fact, I would posit that there are actually two Rotaries. One is the Rotary I've been talking about, the Service Above Self Rotary, the Foundation Rotary, the Rotary where we align ourselves with a humanitarian cause, and go out and proactively do something to make this world of ours just a slightly better, more peaceful place.

The other is the weekly meeting Rotary, the Fellowship Rotary, the Rotary where we get together each week over lunch and listen to a speaker and plan the next fundraiser. Now both these Rotaries are necessary. But I think that increasingly, our club meetings are not supporting the real work of Rotary.

Think of all the trappings that come with the meeting. A meal. Which comes at a cost. In fact, in most clubs, Rotarians pay more to feed themselves than they pay either in dues or in

donations to the Rotary Foundation. And then there are our traditions, which definitely have nothing to do with service or humanitarian work. Sergeant-at-arms. Fines. And my personal favorite: Public apologies for missed meetings. Is it any wonder that newcomers can get confused?

Also, Rotary is very bad at telling its own story. The Northwestern students aren't the only ones who are unsure about our mission. And let's face it: our websites and Facebook pages are almost uniformly out of date, uninformative, filled with inside jargon. Part of the problem is that Club Runner and DacDB, the platforms that are aligned with the RI databases, aren't exactly dynamic; part of the problem is that our sites are maintained by volunteers who have a dozen other priorities; part of the problem is that for every photo of a Rotarian reading a book to a child, there are probably a half-dozen of the grip-and-grin variety. And yet we all know that those Gen-Xers and Gen-Yers who are our future will probably find us – and certainly decide whether or not they wish to join and more important, stick with us – based on our on-line appeal.

Our vocabulary is also out of synch with what we do. We talk about *attendance* when we mean *participation*. We have *fireside chats*. Didn't they disappear when FDR died? And we are obsessed with *makeups*. When I visit other club meetings, yes, there's that gold star I get for just showing up. But there's also something more critical at work: *Networking*. I first started visiting other clubs in my run-up to be club president, and I assure you that every meeting I went to, I learned something to bring back to my club. Okay, so sometimes I learned something I would definitely *never* bring back to my club. But the point is, I always learned something. Plus, it's somebody other than me has pointed out that only in Rotary can you sit next to a professional who bills out at several hundred dollars an hour and just chat. *Networking*.

In my travels the past few months I've recognized one universal: Everyone thinks that their Rotary Club is the best Rotary club. That's obviously great – but it may blind us to potential Rotarians whose needs are not being met by the club. What about those who can't make a breakfast meeting because of work or family or expense, or just because they find the traditions confining?

The point is this: Being a Rotarian is not about saying the Pledge or reciting the Four-Way Test. That's about being a club member. Being a Rotarian is about using our passion to change lives and to build peace. And yet, when it comes to growth, we too frequently are concerned about what it takes to be a good club member, not with what it takes to be a good Rotarian.

Speaking for myself, I believe in Rotary. I believe in the person-to-person service that Rotary embodies. I believe in Rotary's ability to enlist ordinary people like me, and send us out to do something extraordinary to make the world a better place. I believe in Rotary's humanitarian

grants and the power they have to make sustainable change on the ground. I believe in Rotary's scholarship programs, one of the largest scholarship endowments in the world. I believe that what this crazy world needs a *worldwide network of inspired individuals who translate their passions into relevant social causes to change lives*. I believe that what this world needs is Rotary.

I found my Rotary Passion about six months after I joined the Boothbay Harbor Rotary Club in 2003. To tell the truth, the bad singing and all the inside jokes were wearying on me, and I wasn't sure I got this Rotary thing. But the speaker that meeting had just come back from building homes for AIDS orphans in Uganda, and a member of our club had gone with him on the trip. Somebody turned down the lights for the slides, and I remember sitting there in the dark with tears running down my cheeks, wondering what kind of wonderful organization Rotary was that could actually make it possible for a person like me – a person with no special skills or training -- to go to Africa and *DO* something tangible for children in such incredible need.

Since that time, yes, I've been to Africa. I've immunized kids against polio in Nigeria and Mali and Chad, I've fitted amputees with the LN 4 prosthetic hand, I've raised up paraplegics and set them on their first wheelchair and showed them how to work the handlebars, and I've played with orphans who were once abandoned on the street but are now safe in a group home.

And I've also been to Guatemala – in fact, my husband and I go there every year, so we've had the privilege to watch a community of dump kids grow up with the chance to go to school, to use a computer, to work toward the possibility of a good job and a decent life. Last fall, Juan Carlos, our sponsor student, graduated from high school, and this spring he matriculated at four-year university. He's the first member of his family to even finish primary grades. What he has accomplished is astonishing. But it's not only Juan Carlos or his family but the entire community around him that has changed. When Rotary came in, it brought hope. As hope entered in, so has resourcefulness, self-confidence, so has entrepreneurship.

And when Hurricane Katrina hit I sat by the television for about a week and watched a city flood, a city that I had learned to love as a young adult. As an American, I felt helpless. I think we all did. But as a Rotarian, I was able to travel to New Orleans and clean up a church and organize a Rotary Foundation Matching Grant and raise the money to rebuild a soup kitchen and in a tangible way let indigent people know that they might have been forgotten by the authorities, but they hadn't been forgotten by Rotary. I was able to offer respect and dignity in a community where previously there was none.

And perhaps most meaningful to me of all: During my club's annual Veterans Appreciation Night, I am honored to shake hands with aging veterans and thanked them for their service to

this country. And invariably, every time I or a member of my club thanks them for their sacrifice, they turn the tables on us. They thank Rotary for remembering. They thank Rotary for taking the trouble to invite them to dinner.

We are Rotarians. We are inspired individuals. We translate our passions into ways that change lives.

Many of you in this room know exactly what I am talking about because you have found your Passion. And for those of you who haven't discovered your Passion yet, I envy you – because when you do discover it – and you will if you open yourself to the possibility – you are in for the greatest thrill of your life.

You might discover your Passion through a speaker at your club, like I did. You might recognize a Rotary solution to a concern right in your own community or maybe across the world. You might be at a District event, where someone outlines a situation, and you find yourself thinking, "This is something I can do. This is something I *need* to do." And the cool thing is, Rotary will give you the tools so that the *something* you do is sustainable. So that the *something* truly matters.

We are Rotarians. We are inspired individuals.

It's worth pointing out that for all the bru-ha-ha about being a District Governor, all Rotary activism starts at the Club level. Here in District 7780, the Portsmouth Club began Friends Forever 26 years ago, and the young people it first served are now middle-aged with teens of their own, and presumably passing along to their own children what they themselves learned about tolerance and acceptance in those far-away days. The Wells Club started Wrap-a-Smile 12 years ago, and today it spans every continent in the globe and has touched the lives of 18,000 children. Crutches-for-Africa. Shelter Box. Rotaplast. You name the Rotary service project, and I guarantee that if you search back to its origins, you'll discover that it started by one Rotarian in one club.

And that includes the granddaddy of all Rotary Passions. Through Polio Plus, Rotarians over the past 30 years have raised over \$1.2 billion dollars, immunized over 2 billion children, and are on the verge of wiping away a disease that has crippled and killed millions since the beginnings of history. And it all started because the Malolos Rotary Club in the Philippines came up with a local community project and applied for a Rotary Foundation grant.

All these Rotary projects started with one Rotarian going to the club board and asking for support for an idea that probably seemed pretty crazy at the time.

And it probably was crazy, because we live in a crazy world. A world in which a very small fraction of the population uses an incredibly high percentage of its resources. Speaking for myself, I'm not any better looking or smarter or more entitled than the mothers I've met in Guatemala who can't afford to send their children to school, or heartbreakingly, need to make a "Sophie's Choice" between which child will have a chance at a better life and which child will be forced to stay home and live in the dirt. Or the mothers in Africa who live each day in fear because their children are prey to diseases that were eradicated in the West generations ago. Or the mothers in the Philippines who raise their children without decent sanitation or living conditions in shanty communities of 100,000 or more. The only difference between those mothers and me – the only difference between those parents and each of us in this room – is that through the luck of our birth and probably a few smart choices along the way we have options that they don't have, including the option to make a difference.

And so, I offer you a challenge. As you go about the business of Rotary, as you adhere to the traditions, my challenge is that that you never forget the reason why we are Rotarians in the first place: It's because we are *inspired individuals who translate our passion to change lives*. It's because we believe that Service is bigger than Self. It's because we know that Peace will come through that Service. My wish for you is that you enjoy a lifelong rollercoaster adventure wherever your Rotary Passion leads you, however it consumes you. And I invite you to never forget that you are far more than a member of this Rotary Club. You are a life changer; you are an instrument of peace. You are a Rotarian.