

Rotary and Youth

Youth have always been an intrinsic part of the Rotary family. In 1919, just 14 years after Rotary began, Rotarians in Ohio, USA, established the Ohio Society for Crippled Children -- the forerunner of the National Easter Seal Society. Ever since, Rotarians have addressed the needs of youth in their communities, providing support and services, as well as opportunities for growth and development.

The largest impact on the world's children has been through the **PolioPlus** program of The Rotary Foundation. To date, Rotary has contributed US\$373 million to the protection of nearly two billion children. By the year 2005, Rotarian contributions will reach a half billion US dollars to eradicate the crippling disease.

Youth participate in Rotary International programs such as Interact, Rotaract, and RYLA, and take advantage of educational opportunities provided by Youth Exchange and Ambassadorial Scholarships. Youth are also the focus of many Rotary club and district projects, such as mentoring, vocational training, and workshops where community issues are examined. As leaders in their communities, the world's 1.2 million Rotarians are committed to helping young people prepare for the future and to building the next generation of leaders.

Opportunities for leadership and service

Several programs provide youth an opportunity to participate in Rotary's tradition of community service and leadership. In 1962, Rotary International announced the **Interact** program, a service club for youth in secondary schools or between the ages of 14 and 18. Several years later, **Rotaract**, a similar program for individuals between the ages of 18 and 30, was established. The clubs provide opportunities for leadership development, fellowship, and service. Members undertake projects to address issues that they face, including AIDS, homelessness, violence, and drugs. Today there are over 7,000 Interact clubs in 108 countries, and 6,800 Rotaract clubs in 146 countries.

Through **Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RYLA)**, begun in 1971, Rotarians invite young people between the ages of 14 to 30 to participate in an all-expense paid event focusing on leadership and professional development. Sessions are tailored to participants' interests and age groups, and vary from community to community. In some areas, the event is a daylong workshop featuring highly qualified speakers on leadership topics. In other communities, RYLA fills a week with physical activities, small group workshops, and presenters. All RYLA programs, however, share the same surge of enthusiasm and confidence among the youth participants, ready to take leadership in tackling the world's problems.

Opportunities for education

Each year since 1972, some 7,000 students between the ages of 15-19 travel abroad under the auspices of the **Rotary Youth Exchange** program, either for a full academic year or for a shorter-term stay. Youth exchange students live with host families and experience first-hand life, culture, and education in another country to promote international understanding among young people.

Today the **Ambassadorial Scholarships** program, begun in 1947, is the world's largest privately funded international scholarships program. Each year, some 1,200 men and women travel abroad to study at a college or university in another land. They also serve as ambassadors of goodwill to the people of the host country and give presentations about their homelands to Rotary clubs and other groups. For

example, a scholar from Wyoming, USA while studying art in Chile worked with developmentally disabled children to create a 60-foot mural. A scholar from South Africa worked with adolescents from troubled homes at a Connecticut, USA psychiatric hospital.

Group Study Exchange sends teams of young professionals aged 25 to 40 to observe their profession abroad and serve as ambassadors of goodwill. Districts 9810 (Australia) and 5450 (Colorado, USA) participated in a Group Study Exchange in the spring of 1999 focusing on youth violence and suicide. The Colorado team was composed of a high school social studies teacher, an advocate for teens, an intervention counselor and a supervisor in the Colorado Judicial Department. They compared notes with the Rotarians of Melbourne, who have helped to develop programs to combat the city's skyrocketing youth suicide rate. In return, the Australian district sent a team of young professionals to northern Colorado, including Columbine High School. On the team was a worker at an emergency adolescent care center, a youth program coordinator at an at-risk center, a worker for the Youth for Christ program and a youth housing officer. The program proved invaluable to both sides.

Rotarians in service to youth

In addition to supporting the participation of youth in the programs of Rotary International and The Rotary Foundation, clubs are directly involved in addressing the needs of youth in their communities. Working with local youth and youth organizations, Rotarians are addressing concerns ranging from vocational training to health care and violence.

- Brazil – Rotarians in São Paulo launched Mutirão Digital, or Brazilian Net Day, to connect public schools to the World Wide Web. Rotarians worked with school authorities to evaluate the technological resources in local schools and determine the school's individual needs. Once their school was connected, the teachers introduced students to the research tools and discussion forums available online. One project allows students to examine and debate the global issues of peace, economic and social development, and human rights.
- Malaysia – The School Nutrition Program of the Rotary Club of Petaling Jaya currently serves approximately 1,200 students in three schools. Students enjoy regular hot meals during their school "tea breaks" which are made up of a main course of noodles or rice with a hot or cold drink and a piece of fruit, such as papaya or banana. Due to the program, the students who come to school without any breakfast or money for lunch have gained weight, become more attentive in class, and sociable with their classmates.
- France – Through the "Vivre l'Espoir" project, clowns bring cheer to young patients in local hospitals, helping them to better cope during hospital stays. Created in 1996 by Rotarians in the medical profession, "Long Live Hope" helps children experience medical procedures without fear, while improving the healing process through laughter. With specific medical and psychology training under their belts, the clowns visit hospitals in Maubeuge and Valenciennes once a week to perform magic and juggling tricks, tell stories, and play music for the children.