

ROTARY YOUTH EXCHANGE – An introduction

Since it was conceived in 1958, Rotary Student Exchange, or as it has become known, Rotary Youth Exchange has become one of Rotary's most respected and valuable programs. It continues to provide students with an opportunity to study abroad and to gain invaluable levels of personal development.

As we have moved past that sixty-year milestone it is important to reflect on the very first youth programs and how these have led to the development of today's exchange program. History is a most interesting subject. The history of this program is no exception.

In 1927 the Rotary Clubs in Copenhagen, Denmark arranged exchanges. These were for a period of about two weeks and occurred during school holidays.

Then in 1929 the Rotary Club of Nice, France, arranged similar exchanges. These were the forerunner of the different types of short-term exchanges for young people that now run successfully between many countries. There are camps with different themes, bike tours, home stays and the more recent New Generations Exchange.

The most respected of all student exchange programs is the present long term Rotary Youth Exchange.

This had its origin more than fifty years ago at an international assembly of Rotary Governors, held at Lake Placid in the USA in 1958. Harley Shaver, a past Governor from Nebraska asked many of those present to go home and consider this new idea of student exchange. This proposed exchange would enable students to spend a year in a different country, in a different culture whilst going to school.

Joe Bradbury, an incoming Governor from District 280, Australia, accepted the challenge of an exchange between his district and the district in Nebraska, currently District 5450.

At that time, District 280 was one of only 9 Australian districts. These districts had a total of only 326 clubs. That was the beginning. That was the easy part.

He asked two enthusiastic Rotarians, Peter Barnett, of the Rotary Club of Myrtleford, and Clive Schliebs, of the Rotary Club of Wangaratta to both develop the program's rules and promote participation.

But we must go back a few years before that time. Before this new exchange program between districts started, there had already been some students who were invited by either individual Rotarians or clubs in some countries for a year of schooling in another country. One of those arrangements was to have a profound effect on the development of today's district program.

During 1954, the Rotary Club of East Jordon, in Michigan, USA, sent invitations to clubs around the world offering an opportunity for children of Rotarians to come on exchange. Through the Rotary Club of Brunswick, District 280, Victoria, Lynette Hopley, who was the daughter of a Rotarian asked to go. There was no formal application required, no club interview and no counsellor. She was subsequently just advised of her acceptance.

Eventually, on July 24th, 1956 she left for East Jordon. She was one of fifteen international students from several countries who arrived there at the same time. But alas, the predecessor to the current Department of Inland Security quickly raised its officious head. The USA visa authorities advised Rotary that as it was not an authorised exchange organization the student's would have to return home. But there was a saviour. Those fifteen students were quickly endorsed on behalf of Rotary by AFS another exchange organization. AFS prepared the necessary documentation so as they could stay. Rotary and AFS had co-operated to make these and other subsequent exchanges possible. Clubs in that district hosted ten of those student's, the other five stayed in East Jordon, in those days a town of only 5,000 people.

After the 1958 International Assembly at Lake Placid, much work was done to develop the framework of the new program between districts. There were Rotarians in District 280 and other districts in Australia, the district in Nebraska and also another district in Pennsylvania in the USA developing both rules and procedures. A lot of those were and are quite similar to today's rules and procedures.

Interestingly, the two USA districts had no knowledge of each other's efforts in those early days. Of course there was probably only a party line if you used the telephone, certainly no faxes, no emails and no Skype or similar modern communication methods.

The very first exchange was eventually held between District 280 and the District in Nebraska, which included clubs in Colorado.

In January 1959, John Rogers, a 15 year old student from Scottsbluff, Nebraska, USA, arrived in Myrtleford. At the same time two Australian students, Nick Rutherford and Norm Jordon left District 280 for Scottsbluff and Grand Lake, Colorado.

It was those first three Rotary youth exchange students who started what has now become an opportunity of a lifetime for so many others.

In those early days, as you might have expected with something that was new and unproven, the powers in Rotary International had some apprehension about the program.

Would it be supported?

Would it be successful?

Would it damage the image of Rotary?

For the first years, up until it became an official program of Rotary in 1972, it was monitored by the Rotary Foundation, but not as a Foundation project. Thankfully, those early doubts were unfounded, as its ultimate success has now been well proven.

Today there are between 8,000 and 9,000 exchanges arranged each year, both the traditional long term and different types of a short-term duration. These exchanges allow students from roundabout 80 countries of the Rotary world the opportunity of a lifetime. These are an opportunity to develop international friendships, learn about different cultures and the need for a tolerance of each other's cultural differences.

Many significant milestones in the development of the program have occurred over the years. The first ever exchange with Japan and the circumstances of why? And how it was arranged is without doubt one of the most significant.

An Australian airman, who was to later become Rotarian Don Farquhar, was blinded in action against the Japanese during World War II, initiated this. That was amongst an atmosphere of community resentment and in the face of great personal animosity to him.

Although he was blind, Don was a man who displayed a great vision. He sought both reconciliation and the promotion of international understanding and friendship with the Japanese. His view was that nothing could be achieved with a background of animosity. He saw the new program of Rotary Youth Exchange as the means of achieving this through the coming generations of young people.

Subsequently he was invited to address the 1961 Rotary International Conference to promote this ideal. Coincidentally this conference was held in Tokyo. Once again, just like Joe Bradbury had done in 1958, a Japanese Rotarian accepted Don's challenge.

In January 1962, Yoko Miyazaki, who was a typically shy and very nervous 15 year old Japanese girl arrived in Australia to be hosted by Don's club, the Rotary Club of Rosebud in District 280. One can only imagine the feelings of both resentment and acceptance and the emotions of so many people during that year. Never the less, Yoko set about promoting both understanding and friendships, many which still endure today. Yes, the story of Don and Yoko is one, which will endure.

Such was the historical significance of Yoko's arrival and her attendance at Rosebud High School this is now recorded in a series of photographs and are now part of Australia's history in the National Archives collection in Canberra.

After being reconnected with Rotary in 2007, Yoko Sekimoto returned to Australia for a reunion after 43 years with her only living host family, who were living in Cairns. For her this was both a very emotional and a very special tribute to one of the goals of Rotary Youth Exchange, to promote world peace and cultural understanding.

In May 2007, I had an opportunity to meet both Yoko and six other Japanese students who followed her to clubs in the Sydney area for their exchange year in 1962. They all spoke about the many difficulties that they faced and the profound effects that this year had on their personal development. They had no knowledge of the war and its effects on their own people let alone on their new friends in Australia. It is only in relatively recent years that education in Japan has started to acknowledge this part of its history.

During Australia's Bi Centenary in 1988, Don Farquhar was named and recognised as one of two hundred significant Australians. Surely this is an indication of both the importance of both Don's initiative and the value of Rotary youth exchange and its aims and goals.

As the program continued to develop around the world many opportunities opened up for young people to use their exchange as a catalyst for a future career. Peter Seligman was just one such exchange student. He was the first student to go to Germany in 1962 sponsored by the Rotary Club of Essendon in District 280 and hosted by the Rotary Club of Reute. On his return he qualified as an electronics engineer and was ultimately instrumental in the development in 1983 of the speech processor for the Cochlear Implant, which now provides hearing for previously profoundly deaf people. Like so many others, Peter is still grateful for the opportunity given to him by Rotary and readily acknowledges his year as a Rotary exchange student.

Yes. The foresight, the dedication and the work of all of those Rotarians and students in the very beginning cannot be adequately measured. The appreciation of those tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of people, both young and old, that have subsequently had an opportunity to become involved in some way is just one measure of the values and objectives of what we have achieved so far.

Now for the future, the new challenge is for us all to build on this history, the proud history of this most magnificent program of Rotary.

If we reflect on both the motivation and efforts of Rotarian Don Farquhar and those who supported him both here and in Japan, then that dream, if it is an ideal, it is an ideal, which we should all continue to strive for.

A past RI President John Kenny in speaking about Rotary youth exchange quoted a Chinese Proverb; "One generation plants the trees, another generation gets the shade".

He went on to say, the work that each Rotarian and each club undertakes for the Youth Exchange program is not unlike the work of planting a tree. As we cultivate, prune and care for it, we will see the results when young people return home and show a deeper understanding of peacemaker challenges and the importance of Rotary's global nature.

Over the duration, we will have many opportunities to hear the appreciation that former students and others involved in the program have for it. How it has changed the lives of many by giving people a new and different direction in many challenging ways.

To use that Chinese Proverb, there have been many generations, both, past and present, planting and caring for forests of trees, with their following generations benefiting from the shade.

Now there is a significant challenge. To keep planting trees, to keep cultivating and nurturing those trees.

Then the next generations of students will have the same opportunities to study abroad and personally develop themselves that those others before them have had.

Are you up to this challenge?

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