

Past R.I. President Wilf Wilkerson's Speech to the
10th Annual North American Youth Exchange
Network Conference February 26th-28th, 2009
Delta Centre-Ville Hotel
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Master of Ceremonies Al, Distinguished Consul General Mr. Rivas, DG. Peter, Network President Dennis, Conference Co-Chairs Arianne and Fred, Chairman of the R I Youth Exchange Committee Tony Black Rotarians and Friends of Rotary

I have to think that Youth Exchange Committee Members are probably the kindest people in the world or they have a secret wish to make you all suffer. Imagine the organizers, of this important gathering, have once again been kind enough to invite a retired Public Accountant to be your keynote speaker at 8:00 o'clock in the morning. I know many of you have been to this annual meeting before, you've attended International Conventions, Zone and district meetings, you know just how a boring speaker I am but here you are, forced to suffer once again.

Now I know that working with Youth exchange is not an easy job. I think the highlight of my year as District Governor, which was way back in 1971-72 was that I got Youth Exchange started in my District.

We only had two students that year, both from South Africa, but we got it started and it continues till this day. Now I know being involved at any level is very rewarding but I also know as the parents, with my wife Joan, of seven students, that it is not always easy.

The last time I spoke to you I told you of the difficulty we had with our lovely Japanese Daughter in trying to convince her to wear boots and gloves during the cold of winter. This morning I share with you the only really problem son we had. He was from Denmark, A tall handsome boy who was too old for the program. He arrived in late August, and his first set of parents were not returning from a sabbatical in England until a week later. So Joan and I agreed to meet his plane in Toronto and bring him to our house for the first few days.

The third day he was with us I had a further Rotary assignment which was to pick up a Child, with disabilities, who our Club had sponsored at Easter Seal Camp Merrywood, which is in Rotary District 7040. I thought it would be a good idea if our new student saw first hand an ongoing project of our Club. It was just over a two hour drive to the camp from Trenton.

We hadn't gone 10 miles before my new found son said Dad when can I buy my car. I said pardon but Youth Exchange Students can't buy cars because they are not allowed to drive. Well that touched off an argument that lasted until we almost reached our destination. When I made it absolutely clear that there would be no car the young man just sulked and was anything but kind to our disabled passenger on the return trip.

My wife Joan hearing of the incident, said he is too old for the program and he is spoiled, send him home. However we didn't and although Joan was absolutely right the families in Trenton put up with his many antics and I think we made a better man of him. My last report from Denmark

was that he was now head of American Express for all the Scandinavian countries. Perhaps by now he might be a Rotarian, as his uncle had been.

Why I said Joan was correct was that every one of his four families had difficulties with him and as a result the Club could not find homes for new inbound students for several years. It is very important, in my opinion, that you enforce the rules at every level of this program.

This reminds me that when I spoke to you back in March of 2006 the biggest challenge you were all facing was the accreditation program. It presented this Network with some huge problems but what makes me so pleased, is that you came to grips with those problems and resolved them. I think that each of you, but particularly your leaders during those years, many of whom are at this head table or in the audience, deserve tremendous recognition from Rotary International.

As several of you know, I Chair Rotary's "Reach Out to Africa" Task Force. This was created to help me keep my promise to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Bahn Kee Moon. He told me, when we met in February of 2008, that the United Nations would never give up on its support of Rotary's Polio Eradication efforts but he pleaded for Rotary to do more to assist the UN in achieving its Millennium Goals by 2015. I'm pleased to say that the Task Force has made some significant strides in achieving its two goals: The first to attract more members to clubs everywhere in Africa and second encourage Rotarians as individuals, as Clubs, as Districts, as RI Committees or as Rotary Action Groups to take a greater interest in Africa.

I noticed that with the exception of South Africa there are few, if any, exchanges from the other African countries. I believe the challenge would be best addressed by clubs in Europe including the United Kingdom and Clubs in South East Asia. In these areas the many languages of Africa are spoken, travel times are shorter and the need for young people on the African Continent to be exposed to other cultures is enormous. So I would request you, as the leaders of the North American Network, when attending international meetings of Youth Exchange Officers to raise this great opportunity that exists. It won't be easy, it will take time and patience to get Districts in many African Countries certified but it would be a tremendous peace initiative, where you could play a significant role.

As some of you know as your R I President I tried hard to recognize the work of all the Committee's involved with Youth and Young Adults. I understand that in true Rotary fashion you have even come up with an abbreviation to identify the group. I'm told that you are now known as the YAYA group. I think that is excellent.

However, like every President of Rotary, I think back at what I could have done and one of those things would have been to establish some form of recognition for all the persons who have provided years of great service to the YAYA programs.

Hopefully one of my successors will take up the idea because I feel it's an idea whose time has come.

When it comes to recognition my mind turns to all those from District 5100 who in Portland Oregon suffered such a tragedy. The students who died or were injured, the Youth Exchange Committee and the host parents, acted with care compassion and the greatest expertise.

I feel the time has also come for all the Committees of Rotary, involved with Youth and Young Adults, to work more closely together. As some in this room know I had our very hard working staff, in Evanston, arrange the schedule of Committee meetings in such a way that on one day all members of these important Committees could participate in a joint meeting. I was delighted that this years President D K Lee followed the same procedure and once again a joint meeting was convened.

The Youth and Young Adult programs of Rotary are one of its greatest efforts. Here we see Rotary sharing its core values of Service, Fellowship, Diversity, Integrity and Leadership with those that will lead both our organization in the future and also the world.

That is why I urge each of you as leaders of this important program to recognize that during this world-wide economic downturn you might have to go easy on your demands on Clubs, Districts and individual Rotarians. Fewer families and Clubs may have the resources to send students or receive them. However the program must carry on so Clubs and Districts should be approached to provide more support but every effort should be made to keep the operating costs to a minimum.

As you might expect I would like to emphasize what a great contribution Youth Exchange and the other Youth and Young Adult programs are making to the family of Rotary. Interact, RYLA and Rotaract, the other official programs of Rotary are each doing exceptional work. However I think that in each case more could be done to inform the participants that they are part of the family of Rotary. Youth Exchange participants should be encouraged to seek out the other programs of both Rotary and of its Foundation as they grow and mature. At every level of Youth Exchange we should be exposing our students to the objectives of Rotary and its philosophy of Peace.

I think that each of our YAYA programs has a special focus for the participants:

Youth exchange helps students grow up and recognize the customs and cultures of others.

RYLA or Camp Enterprise specializes in teaching leadership.

Interact introduces Fellowship and Service to the community, while,

Rotaract provides greater opportunity for Community and International service as well as the concept of Vocational service, including aspects of Integrity and Diversity.

Interact Clubs can make an Exchange Student feel very welcome, they can also be the place where a Rotary Club can first look for outbound students.

Rotaractors can play a big part in organizing and running RYLA programs. They are closer in age and can often relate more easily to the participants. Married Rotaractors might become hosting families for Youth Exchange students, providing they are in a position to meet the requirements for hosting.

What I'm suggesting is that you broaden your perspective of the "Family of Rotary" and do your best to inform Youth Exchange students of its size, its accomplishments and of their inclusion as part of that family. Because they are members of that Family, we must keep in touch with them in every way possible including Rotex or Rebound organizations at the District level.

I would hope that host families and sponsors would be aware of the Rotary story. That they would recognize the synergies that exist between our Youth and Young Adult programs. Synergies that would see Interactors become Youth Exchange Students or vice versa. That they would be familiar with RYLA and that as they attend University or start their careers they would consider membership in Rotaract.

My friends when I attended my first Rotary International Convention at Toronto Canada in 1964 one of the speakers was a very recent Nobel Prize Peace winner from Canada. His name was Lester Pearson and he went on in later years to become one of our Prime Ministers.

What he said at that Convention always stayed with me. He stated very emphatically that "You can't have Peace until people know each other and people can't know each other until they have met"

That is what Rotary is doing for Peace, it is providing the opportunity for persons from all over the world to meet. Your Youth Exchange Program is the place where so much of that work starts.

I thank, each and everyone of you for taking time to attend this meeting, in this historic city of Montreal, where Rotary will celebrate its 2010 Convention, and I thank you, on behalf of Rotary and the young women and men from all over the world. The theme chosen for this conference says it all "Building Peace Through Individual Global Relationships"

You are truly "Making Dreams Real" as suggested by President D K Lee and the world will be a better and more peaceful place because of your efforts.

Thank you.