

Each year 9,000 high school/post-high school students-ages 15 to 19 years old-participate in Rotary's Youth Exchange (RYE) Program around the globe. This program is designed to expand learning of different cultures, experience student life in a different country, develop language skills, gain confidence, build lasting friendships, encourage lifelong leadership abilities, and learning the value of becoming a global citizen. "One generation plants the trees and another gets the shade" Chinese Proverb



Speaker this week at Rotary was one of our own, Richard Green, a former Rotary Youth Exchange student some 32 years ago. This was rather fortuitous because visiting Friday morning was our club's outgoing student exchange student 2018 Sanibel resident, Ian VandeVelde. Ian is a Bishop Verot graduate and last summer attended Rotary District 6960 Seminar for Tomorrow Leaders. He will be receiving his country assignment soon and will be leaving in July to begin this exceptional learning experience.

The Rotary Club of Copenhagen, Denmark initiated the first Rotary exchange in 1927. Exchanges today usually last ten months although the first exchanges took place during school vacations for only a couple of weeks. In the following years more and more countries became involved in the program. In 1962 the first student exchange involving Japan and Germany were arranged after tense relations still existed between Japan/Germany Rotary Clubs and other Rotary International Clubs following World War II. Since its conception 80 years ago, the Rotary Youth Exchange program has expanded rapidly involving more than 80 countries today.

As sort of an inside glimpse of what a Rotary exchange student might experience and what he might gain from the Youth Exchange program Richard, gave an overview of his own personal experience with the RYE. Just a little backup here, Richard had this experience 32 years ago. A year in the life of a young man from the UK, who after visiting the US when he was 11, dreamt that he would return when he was older and spend some time finding out what the US had to offer. When Richard finished his secondary schooling at 16 in England, he thought okay I'll just go to the US now. His father asked how are you going to do that? Richard had no real answer, so his father suggested he continue his schooling in a two-year program at college. While there, a couple of Rotarians came to the college to talk about Rotary's Youth Exchange program and before he knew it, it was off to Oak Ridge High School, Orlando, Florida, USA- Post-Graduate Studies sponsored by Rotary District 109, England.

One year, two different families, a plethora of supportive Rotarians, and lasting friendships forever. Although expected to take his studies seriously, he got to select courses he was interested and didn't have any trouble on that front. He fit right in, no language barriers, no real in your face culture shock. So, what made his experience so meaningful? Well, it was those extra-curricular activities, friendships made, and involvement with his host families and his first introduction to what Rotary was doing around the world.



The largest club in his high-school, just so happened to be the Rotaract Club. Get where we're going? Rotaract is a Rotary youth program that brings together students to exchange ideas with leaders in their community, develop leadership and professional skills, and have fun through service. Rotary and Rotaract members work side by side to act through service developing the skills to identify a need in your community, finding a way to service that need...sometimes on a simple level, sometimes by finding a network of like-minded individuals to work together forming bonds of assuredness that will hold through an entire lifetime. Richard formed friendships during his youth exchange program stay in Orlando, friendships that are still standing today. He established leadership qualities that enabled him a note-worthy business career both in the UK and later here in the States. But the fact is, he didn't become a Rotarian until he came to Sanibel. As Richard told us, "the time was right, and Sanibel-Captiva Rotary was right."

Richard was what I called Rotarized 32 years ago and it stuck. Rotary's code of ethics, both personally and professionally grew from that student exchange experience. Richard knew that this experience shaped his future and guided the type of person he would become. Somewhat unusual for him he saved many items collected from that school year...mementos to remind him of the personal growth he had experienced participating in the Rotary Student Exchange program and to this day he is emotionally connected to that time and what it meant for his future. He learnt the power of this program and what Rotary's slogans "Building Bridges Across Nations" and "Service above Self" meant and how that conduct can lead to a better world for all concerned.

