**Women in Rotary**

Did you know that until 1989, the Constitution and Bylaws of Rotary International stated that Rotary club membership was for males only?

Prior to that, wives of Rotarians were known as “Rotary Anns.” The term came about in 1914 when Rotarians from the west coast took a train to the 1914 RI convention in Houston. Rarely did wives accompany their husbands to the convention. But that year, Ann Brunnier from San Francisco, was on the train with her spouse. She was very popular. One of the other passengers commented that he didn’t want to call her Mrs. Brunnier and asked for her first name. She replied “Ann” and she was quickly dubbed “Our Rotary Ann.” The convention goers decided all ladies will be known as Rotary Anns.

There have been ladies’ committees associated with Rotary, usually spearheaded by a club president wife. In 1923, a RI vice president, visiting Manchester, England, suggested the ladies form a women’s club. Unable to use the word, “Rotary”, the British ladies decided to call themselves, Inner Wheel. The clubs quickly spread across Britain, Australia, and South Africa but never took off in the United States. Today, they are still active in 104 countries, with 108,000 members in 3,895 clubs.

In 1978, the Rotary Club of Duarte, California, USA, invited three women to become members. The RI Board withdrew the charter of that club for violation of the RI constitution. The club brought a suit against RI, claiming a violation of a state civil rights law that prevents discrimination of any form in business establishments or public accommodations. The appeals court and the California Supreme Court supported the Duarte position that Rotary could not remove the club's charter merely for inducting women into the club. The United States Supreme Court upheld the California court indicating that Rotary clubs do have a "business purpose" and are in some ways public-type organizations. This action in 1987 allowed women to become Rotarians in any jurisdiction having similar "public accommodation" statutes.

In 1988-89 District 7570 was under the leadership of PDG Charlie Seay from the Rotary Club of Kingsport. The International theme was “Put Life into Rotary-Your Life” and RI President Royce Abbey of Australia, visited our district that year. The district re-enforced this when the two new clubs were chartered during PDG Seay’s year. They were Scott County, Virginia and Danville-Riverview. These clubs were among the first clubs in the district who had women as **charter members** following the decision of the US Supreme Court, the RI Board and 1989 Council on Legislation that women were to be accepted as members of Rotary. However, in 1987, Diane Christian became the first woman inducted into a Rotary Club in our district when she became a member of the Radford Rotary Club.

The first female president of a District Club was Gladys Duran of Greeneville TN Noon Club. She was elected in 1988 to serve 1989-90.

The RI constitutional change was made at the 1989 Council on Legislation, with a vote to eliminate the "male only" provision for all of Rotary. Since that time, women have become members and leaders of clubs and districts throughout the world. DG Dick Ray (2017-2018) had a goal of achieving 30% female members in honor of the 30th anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling. The district is now at 33%. We can do better!

In District 7570, we have had seven female District Governors out of 107 DGs. Our first was Barbara Hargroves in 2003-2004, a member of the Abingdon Rotary Club. Seven years later, she was followed by Patricia Combs from Bristol. Pat’s year was 2010-2011. She was followed the next year by Janet Johnson of the Christiansburg-Blacksburg club. Vivian Crymble of the TriCities Club in Tennessee was our fourth female Governor in 2014-2015. Six years later, in 2020-2021, Nancy Whitlock, of the Waynesboro club joined the ranks. Nancy’s year was marred by COVID-19 and much of what she did was held over Zoom. Tara Ellis of the Bristol VA-TN Club followed Nancy in 2021-2022 and Kathy Kanter from Strasburg followed in 2022-2023. Kathy is married to Dr. Bryon Brill, who was District Governor in 2007-2008, making them our only married-to-another-DG couple. Paula Alston of the Blacksburg club will be our 8th female DG.



In 2020, the Rotary International Nominating committee selected Jennifer Jones from the Rotary Club of Windsor‑Roseland, Ontario, Canada as the first female President of RI. She will serve during the 2022-2023 Rotary year. Jennifer will be quickly followed by Stephanie Urchick of the Rotary Club of McMurray, Pennsylvania, USA. She is the selection of the Nominating Committee for President of Rotary International for 2024-2025.



RI President Carlos Canseco (1984-1985) from Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, said, “I was against the idea of women joining Rotary; I was wrong in taking such a position. Women have brought new life to Rotary.  Every club that has female members is more active, more committed, has more vitality than those without.  It took us too many yeas to realize we were wrong.  Women will help steer the future of Rotary in a very exciting direction; and with so many women in business and the professions now, we have unlimited opportunities for growth there.” He is also the RI president that launched the international campaign to eradicate polio.

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