

A History, briefly summarized, of the Rotary Club of Denver

Written in May, 2005 by Preston and Carolyn Smith for inclusion in the time capsule celebrating the first 100 years of Rotary International.

December 1, 1911: The Rotary Club of Denver was awarded its charter as the 31st Club within the Rotary world. Denver in 1911 was “a major American city, one of the top 25 in population in the nation. In the 50 years since its frontier founding, 213,000 had settled at our Platte River Gateway to the central Rocky Mountains.” Gratton E. Hancock, a typewriter salesman and first president of Denver Rotary, responded to the need of business and professional men for better communication among themselves. “They wanted to regain the sense of acquaintance and community they had left in the hometown settings of youth.” They wanted a “better forum for effecting civic causes.”

This was the beginning of a tradition of “Service Above Self” and weekly fellowship and interchange for hundreds of Denver Rotary members over the years. The Club has met regularly ever since, almost weekly, in downtown Denver at mid day to hear prominent speakers addressing topics of variety and import. The Club President, often a prominent Denver leader, presides. The Club Secretary is the club’s “Jester” adding important levity to the meetings. Only men, representing a wide variety of businesses and professions, were members until 1988 when women were invited to join. Membership has reflected the business climate in Denver. There was a long period when the presidents of corporations, banks, foundations and other local, powerful entities were naturally also members of Denver Rotary. As traditions have changed and the motivations of corporate leaders have led them else where, Denver Rotary has become a club of individuals who appreciate fellowship and the influence that groups acting together for good can have on the world and local community. Membership numbers have fluctuated in response to changing tradition however its efforts to support its projects have remained consistent.

The impact of the Rotary Club of Denver has been felt locally, nationally and internationally, as well as its members have generously given leadership and funding to a wide variety of significant projects.

Of particular importance to the youth of our community, Denver Kids is the club’s signature project established by members 60 years ago and actively supported today. This counseling and mentoring program for students in the Denver Public Schools was founded when members saw the sons of soldiers lost in World War II as needing personal support. The club later founded a program for girls who similarly were at risk of leaving school before graduation.

Other local projects have been founded by members in response to community needs:

- The Scholastic Art Awards program has encouraged Middle and High School students talented in many forms of art expression.
- College and High School Scholarships are awarded to deserving young people and relationships between Rotarians and their students give encouragement and guidance to them and unique compassion to their mentors.
- Assistance is given to students seeking Vocational training.
- Rotarians read to young students in the Childhood Literacy Committee.
- Rotarians give to children with cancer through the Shining Stars program.

The World Community Service Committee has remained strong and innovative since the founding of the Club. The Committee leverages its financial support by using Club funds matched with district and national funding to impact significant projects around the world

often introduced by our members.

Our Club responded with extraordinary generosity to the call by Rotary International to overcome Polio in the world. Individual club members made among the largest financial gifts in the Rotary world and some assisted in the distribution of the polio vaccine to children wherever the need is greatest.

Club members have promoted and coordinated international exchange for high school students and adults through the Youth Exchange and Group Study Exchange programs of Rotary International. These

Typical of its commitment to international understanding, the Denver Rotary Club hosted International Conventions in 1926, 1941 and 1966.

The Denver Rotary Club Foundation, founded in 1969, has enabled the Club to support projects in this community as well as many around the world. By early 1977 the foundation had \$32,000 “and a committee was studying its restructuring with the thought that growing demands on the club were going to make essential a far more substantial ‘kitty’ for future service projects.”

In 1981 the Club initiated one of two block buster fund raisers that would add substantially to the club’s ability to underwrite its local and international projects.

For twenty memorable years, the Club produced Artists of America, an art exhibition and sale that brought close to two million dollars to the Denver Rotary Club Foundation. Beyond the dollars raised, the show became recognized by artists and those who appreciate fine representational art as an annual event they would not miss. School children were introduced by trained docents to the sculpture and paintings by the finest living artists from across the country. A seminar program gave selected artists a forum to share their philosophy and techniques with those interested. It was known in the art world as “the Rotary Show” and sent around the country a buzz about what the Denver Rotary Club could accomplish with its devoted members and tireless volunteer leadership.

The second major fund raiser that started in 1992 is the club’s annual Branch Rickey Dinner, named for the baseball giant known to have impacted racial integration within the world of baseball. A member of a baseball team, nominated by team mates and selected by a national panel of sports enthusiasts as both important to baseball and a contributor to their community, is honored every year. The Branch Rickey award is becoming the “Heisman trophy” of baseball, recognized nationally in the baseball world and cherished by its winners. The Denver Rotary Foundation has grown to \$3.6 million in its 36 years while at the same time contributing significantly to the Club’s local and international projects.

The history of the Rotary Club of Denver, briefly told above, mirrors the responsibility its members feel for the youth of Denver and the humanity of people everywhere. It is a rich history of one of Rotary’s largest, most active and most prominent clubs. Its members wear their Rotary membership with pride knowing that they are part of both a local and world wide effort at peace and understanding through Rotary.