

SUMMER 2023

SPARTANBURG

MAGAZINE

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Rotary: Engine for connection

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Spartanburg Rotary Club's business is more than just business

With their motto of "Service Above Self" and a "Four-Way Test" for civility, group has been a fixture in the city for 107 years.

By Chuck Milteer, Contributing Editor
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On any given Tuesday at lunchtime, you can find them at the Piedmont Club in downtown Spartanburg, learning about area businesses and organizations, about community issues and their fellow members, and generally doing what successful professionals do – networking.

The Rotary Club of Spartanburg is sometimes considered the city's "downtown business club," and counts as its members many of the leaders in industry, banking, real estate, law, medicine, education and other professions.

But members say there's much more to it, that they are often surprised by the depth of community connection that service through the club provides.



Top, William Gray, President of The Rotary Club of Spartanburg, talks with visiting Rotary Foundation official Kevin Kitto of Florida at the Paul Harris Fellows celebration dinner in April. JOHN GALLANT

Right, mementos and memorabilia displayed at the event included Paul Harris Fellows pins and medallions as well as the president's gavel presented to longtime member and multiple-time fellow Mike Kohler, who died in June 2022 at the age of 87. JOHN GALLANT

Each Rotarian commits to conducting themselves ethically in business and in life – the motto of the organization is “Service above Self.”

The club, its foundation and members serve by giving much of their time and many, many thousands of dollars in grants and donations to help address needs in Spartanburg and provide help across the world.

A cornerstone of membership is the aspirational “Four Way Test,” a 24-word set of questions to ask, “of the things we think, say or do.”

Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

“My, what a better world it would be, if everyone would do that,” says Joe Mullinax, a member of the club’s board and its Public Relations chair.

The club’s membership includes men

and women of different political and religious affiliations as well as occupations. It includes a former Republican member of Congress and the county’s current Democratic Party chair, as one example.

“They’re all good people and it’s awesome to just see them break bread on a weekly basis,” says current club president William Gray.

Just attending the weekly lunches provides nourishment for that spirit of goodwill, he says.

“What happens is you’re going to these meetings every week and you’re hearing it over and over and over again – Service, Service, Service — and you’re hearing about disparities in your community and in the world and it’s an unspoken call to action on a weekly basis. You start to think about ‘what am I doing here if I don’t get involved?’”



The Rotary Club of Spartanburg celebrated its founding in April 1916 with a dinner at the old Gresham Hotel on Magnolia Street. Meetings were held at the YMCA. SPARTANBURG COUNTY LIBRARY

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Top Left, the Rotary Club of Spartanburg celebrated its 100th year in 2016 with the installation of the Centennial Clock at the corner of E. Main and Liberty Streets. **TIM KIMZEY**

Top Right, Club Foundation Chair Scott Giouard, District 7750 Governor Joyce Morin, President William Gray and District 7750 Foundation Chair Beth Padgett with the banner celebrating the club's attainment of 100% Paul Harris Fellow status. **JOHN GALLANT**

Middle Left, Coby Hennecy will become the club's President in July, the third woman to hold the position, all since 2010. **JOHN GALLANT**

Middle Right, Former U.S. Rep Liz Patterson was the first woman to serve as the club's President in 2010. **FILE PHOTO**

Bottom Left, mementos and memorabilia displayed at the event included Paul Harris Fellows pins and medallions presented to members. **JOHN GALLANT**

Bottom Right, former Club President and Rotary Foundation supporter Cindy Kelly got a standing ovation when she was presented with recognition at the Paul Harris Fellows event in April. **JOHN GALLANT**

'IT'S PART OF OUR DNA'

For Gray, it started in high school. "When I was in 10th or 11th grade, my dad, who was a member, said I should sign up for the club's job-shadowing program." Charlie Gray gave his son a list of club members who had volunteered to mentor students.

William chose Cullen Pitts, an architect. The experience helped steer Gray to his career.

Gray is an alumnus of Spartanburg Day School and Clemson University's School of Architecture. After college, he returned home to begin his career with McMillian Smith and Partners (now McMillan Pazdan Smith) and has been there since. He is the director of the regional architecture firm's Spartanburg office.

Pitts and Ron Smith, both leaders in the firm, are also still active in Rotary, as is Karen Calhoun, the firm's director of business development.

Like most members, Gray joined



Rotary through his work.

"We are, as a firm, very community-focused," he says. "Getting involved in service organizations is one way we can do that. It's part of our DNA."

At 41, Gray is also more than a

decade younger than the average age of a Rotarian.

He says he hopes that his relative youth will be an encouragement to others to join.

"We've focused on getting younger professionals and letting them know that they have a place in Rotary."

His successor as club president, ETV Endowment Executive Director Coby Cartrette Henney, will take office in July. She will be the club's third female president. Former 4th District Rep. Liz Patterson was the first in 2010. Gray's predecessor was investment manager Cindy Kelly.

With more than 180 members, the Spartanburg club is the largest in the Upstate and about 20 percent of members are women. About 10 percent are people of color, though club leaders say that as the club grows, one of the priorities is for Spartanburg Rotary to look more like Spartanburg.

At 41, club President William Gray is more than a decade younger than the average age of its members, emblematic of Rotary's emphasis on attracting a younger, more diverse membership. JOHN GALLANT



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SUPPORTING 'BIG ROTARY'

The Rotary Club of Spartanburg was founded in 1916, at a gathering of two dozen business leaders at the old Gresham Hotel on Magnolia Street. That was just a decade after Chicago lawyer Paul Harris started what grew into Rotary International.

The organization's name comes from its origins when Harris and several fellow Chicago professionals began meeting weekly to discuss business and serving their communities. The gatherings "rotated" among their offices. By the time the club grew big enough to need a larger, more permanent meeting site, the Rotary name had stuck.

It grew rapidly, first across the Midwest, then the U.S., then the world.

These days, the organization, which local club members call "Big Rotary," has 1.2 million members in more than 35,000 clubs in more than 160 countries around the world.

Nearly 50 Rotary Clubs are in the Upstate and the western part of South Carolina. Known as Rotary District 7750, it includes three other clubs in Spartanburg County.

The Rotary Foundation is the charitable nonprofit for Rotary International and pools resources contributed by members of local clubs for use in Rotary's work across the globe.

That work is grouped around several areas of focus, including education and literacy, economic development, protecting the environment, maternal and child health, clean water and sanitation, disease prevention and promoting peace and goodwill throughout the world.

Rotary is perhaps best known for its worldwide work to eradicate the spread of polio, a largely successful, nearly 50-year effort to vaccinate more than 2 billion children worldwide.

Local club members responsible for over \$1,000 in donations to the foundation are honored as Paul Harris Fellows, after Rotary's founder. In April, the Spartanburg Rotary gathered to celebrate 100 percent of its membership becoming Paul Harris Fellows, a distinction achieved by less than 20 percent of all clubs.

Gray credits club Foundation Chair Scott Giouard for leading the 100 percent effort, which saw nearly half of the club's members reach the fellowship distinction in a single year.

The 84 new Paul Harris fellowships signify at least \$84,000 contributed to the foundation. All totaled, the club has given \$750,000 to the foundation.

Beth Padgett is chair of The Rotary Foundation for District 7750. With its membership and fundraising success, she praised Spartanburg Rotary as "a club on fire."

"I enjoy the opportunity for community service, and I feel like we're really moving the needle."

Joe Mullinax, Rotary Club of Spartanburg

'IT'S A LOT OF FUN TO GIVE MONEY AWAY'

Contributions to the foundation are over and above the club's local charitable giving that includes funding of scholarships, reading and music programs for local schools, and the Piedmont Science Fair, which the club has sponsored for more than 60 years.

"It's a lot of fun to give away money – every year we give \$30,000 in youth opportunity grants," Gray says. "That day when we are able to bring the groups to the meeting and recognize them and give them a check – that's really fun."

Besides money, the club provides thousands of hours of volunteer work, including with the Salvation Army and Rotary Readers, where members go into each 2nd grade classroom in District 7 to read to students and talk to them

Interested in Rotary?

Becoming a Rotarian begins with an invitation from a current member, but more information about the process is available at spartanburgrotary.com.

Dues and fees total about \$1,200 per year, billed quarterly

about the importance of education.

"I enjoy the opportunity for community service, and I feel like we're really moving the needle," Mullinax says.

"It's just cool to be a part of something that you can see the impact locally and that also has a broader reach than just Spartanburg."

NETWORKING AND 'MOMENTS OF DISCOVERY'

"So often, I meet people who want to start a business in Spartanburg or learn how to win a project. They ask, 'what should I do to make connections?'"

Gray says. "One of the first things I say is 'you might want to think about getting involved in Rotary.' Our club is super strong. We've got a ton of members. We've got college presidents, the district school superintendents, CEOs, you name it."

Networking is vital, he says, but Rotary is more than just an opportunity for business development.

"You have direct access to people who are in good positions – and people are often drawn to that. But what keeps them involved is all the ways they can make a difference. It's really nice to watch that play out and sometimes see that moment of self-discovery for people."

About a year into Rotary membership, members are expected to offer a 10-minute "new member talk," where they formally introduce themselves to the club. Gray described one member who reflected on that self-discovery during his talk and was momentarily overcome with emotion. "He said that he didn't expect Rotary to have such an impact on him."

Rotarians are, almost by nature, successful and, consequently, busy people, leaders in their own fields and organizations.

But for Gray and his fellow Rotarians, adding club leadership to their plates seems like a natural extension of that desire to serve, he says.

"I look at all the people who came before me and did their part to keep this going and keep it strong. Now it's part of my duty if I'm asked to do it. It's that simple."

Ongoing Projects of the Rotary Club of Spartanburg

The club's annual charitable giving is more than \$70,000, plus volunteer time

Piedmont Science Fair – Members of

The Rotary Club of Spartanburg started the Piedmont Region III Science Fair over 60 years ago. Since then, the Club has been the main sponsor. The Club covers the entire cost of the event and pays for the high school student winner and chaperone to attend the national Science Fair. (See more photos, Page 36)

Spartanburg Sings – Students from middle

schools across Spartanburg County join as one Honor Chorus for an annual special benefit concert to showcase their vocal talent. Event proceeds benefit local organizations selected for the Youth Opportunity Grants.

"Books as Mirrors" Project – The Hub City

Writers Project launched this program at six Spartanburg County public schools. Each school received \$5,000 of new, culturally relevant, and diverse books; schools were prioritized based on the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch. The Club is one of several sponsors.

Rotary Reader – Rotarians visit every 2nd

grade classroom in District 7 schools to read a favorite book or one provided by the teacher.

Interact Club – Service and leadership club

at Spartanburg High School is provided support and guidance.

Youth Opportunity Grants – Competitive

grants benefit hundreds of students each year with leadership training, educational enrichment, science education, pediatric dental referrals, development of independent living skills and drowning prevention classes. The Club consistently awards \$30,000 annually.

Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RYLA)

– Club sends two students chosen by Spartanburg High School to Erskine College for a weeklong conference.

Salvation Army – Bellringing at Eastside

Walmart, covering two Saturdays in December.

Rotary Has Heart – Around Valentine's Day, includes projects such

as providing food for children through the backpack project, working at a local soup kitchen and delivering food packages and meals to children.

Education = Hope Project – Volunteer effort to provide for the education of those living in desperate and difficult situations.

Peru Clean Water Project – improves quality of life for thousands

of people (mostly children) living alongside the Rimac river in Peru, where Bio Sand water filters are urgently needed.



CART – Coins for Alzheimer's Research Trust provides funds for cutting edge research on the disease. Started in 1996 with Rotarians emptying pockets and purses of change at weekly meetings.

Rotary International Youth Exchange –

Builds peace one young person at a time. Students aged 15-19 learn a new language, discover another culture, and truly become global citizens. Long term exchanges last a full academic year and short-term exchanges last from several days to three months.

The Rotary Foundation – Transforms gifts into service projects that change lives both close to home and around the world. The Club contributes \$15,000 annually to The Rotary Foundation for use on the Polio Plus and SHARE campaigns.

Boys and Girls State – Club provides annual scholarships to the American Legion which sponsors a weeklong stay for one boy and one girl.

College Scholarships – The Club funds a scholarship for a rising sophomore, junior and senior at one of the local colleges in Spartanburg. Nominations come from colleges and the Club picks the recipients.

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Top, Spartanburg Sings is a Rotary-supported program that gathers a middle school honor chorus for a benefit concert each year. Middle, Each year, The Rotary Club of Spartanburg presents \$30,000 in Youth Opportunity Grants to a wide variety of organizations that benefit Spartanburg's young people. Bottom, bell-ringing for the Salvation Army is just one of the many ways club members serve the community.

PROVIDED PHOTOS