

Frank Talk

How YOU Can Make a Difference

In Your Career, Your Community, and

Your World Through Membership in

Rotary®

by

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Rotary International President, 2000-2001

with

David C. Forward

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CHAPTER 1

Chance Encounter

Dense fog enveloped the airport like a giant gray shroud. Mighty jetliners—aeronautical arrows normally capable of connecting continents in a single bound—sat lifeless on the ramp, the paralyzed victims of the blanket of gloom. Pilots could not even see the ground from their cockpit windows. Nothing was moving. Not trucks. Not my flight. Not me.

The lines at the customer service counter snaked beyond the gate area and along the concourse like a motionless conga line. My final destination in the nation's capital was but a 50-minute flight away, and I had to be there for a gala event at which I was the keynote speaker that very evening. It was time to call for help. It was time to call RITS—Rotary International Travel Service—at the Rotary headquarters in Evanston, Illinois.

Within five minutes they had my solution all planned. “There’s an express train that leaves in 48 minutes,” the agent said, assuringly. “You need to get a cab to the main station downtown, and I’ve arranged for your ticket to be ready at the Will-Call window. You’ll still have two hours between when the train arrives and when the dinner starts.”

I hurried to the nearest exit door and turned right, thinking that the best spot to hail a taxi would be at the point where they entered the airport. As if in answer to my prayer, a cab appeared through the lingering mist.

“Taxi!”

“Taxi!”

“Taxi!”

It stopped right beside me, and as I reached for the door I turned to see the source of the multiple calls. Barely ten paces behind me, a woman was running in my direction. Three steps behind her was a young man with a pained look on his face.

“I’ve been trying to find a cab for 20 minutes,” the woman protested. “My flight was cancelled and I have to get to the station to catch a train. I’m desperate! You’re not heading into town by any chance, are you?”

“Better than that,” I assured her. “I’m also going to the station. Hop in.” The young man was now beside us. “Me too,” he said. “Any chance you could make room for one more?”

As we pulled away from the curb, I got my first look at the hordes of passengers outside the terminal’s main doors. There must have been a thousand people, all looking expectantly for a car, a bus, a cab—any form of transport that could move them closer to their destination. I turned to my guests. “Hi! I’m Frank Devlyn,” I said, extending my hand.

“My name is Sue; I’m happy to meet you. And thank you so much for letting me share your taxi.” She was an attractive woman, smartly dressed in a well-cut red suit with elegant accessories. Probably in her late-forties, I thought.

“I’m Bob. Pleased to meet you. Thanks for the ride.” The man’s introduction interrupted my inspection of Sue. He was much younger, maybe 30. He was dressed in neatly pressed blue jeans and a sweatshirt.

I enjoy studying human behavior. I like to try to understand what makes people act the way they do, so as the car sped along, I tried to unobtrusively observe my two guests. They could not have been more different. Sue was gregarious, funny, and warm. She freely used hand gestures when talking and was obviously one of those people who made friends easily. Bob, on the other hand, seemed to be the quiet type who rarely initiated conversation, and responded with monosyllabic answers.

They made quite a pair, I thought to myself. I spend so much time on airplanes that I sometimes try to guess what people do for a living, just by observing how they dress and behave. “I’ll bet she is in public relations, and he is...hmmm...he might be an engineer, or one of those dot-com Generation Xers I’ve been meeting over the last couple of years,” I silently speculated.

“Tell me about yourselves,” I invited.

Probably to nobody’s surprise, Sue spoke first. “I’m married and have two beautiful daughters, aged 19 and 22,” she began. “For the past

25 years, I've worked in the airline industry, for South American Airways." She went on to explain how she had worked her way up from junior sales representative to regional sales manager and it was clear she loved her job. But a few months earlier, the company had found itself in dire financial straits. It closed offices, eliminated routes, and laid off staff around the world. As a 25-year veteran, Sue's income made an attractive target for the cost-cutters at headquarters. They figured one way to restore the company to profitability was to offer early retirement to long-term employees, and Sue suddenly found herself a retiree— even if involuntarily. "Many of us were pretty much forced to accept the 'take-it-or-leave-it' offer," she explained. "I'm getting a check every month, but I can't imagine sitting around doing nothing. And I really miss the interaction with people during the day. So I've been trying to start a consulting business, primarily targeted at the travel industry."

"How about you, Bob?" Even though it was his turn, I had asked Bob to do something unnatural—to share personal information about himself. "I work as a software designer for eData Systems," he said, in a soft, measured voice.

"Aha!" I thought to myself. "I had this fellow pegged!"

"Are you married? Do you have kids?" Sue had taken over the role of inquisitor.

"I'm not married. My friend Sarah and I live together. We'll probably get married one day. Our 'child' is a golden retriever. We both work such crazy hours, there's no room in our schedule for kids."

“How about you, Frank?” Sue enquired.

“Well as I said before, my name is Frank Devlyn. I’m from Mexico.”

“Devlyn? That doesn’t sound Mexican,” Sue interrupted.

“My dad was American of Irish descent, my mom is Mexican. I grew up with my feet in both countries, literally. We lived in Juarez, Mexico, but I went to school in El Paso, Texas. I have been bilingual for as long as I could talk. Gloria Rita and I have been married for 35 years and we have three daughters—all married now—and five wonderful grandchildren. My career has been spent in the family business. We operate a chain of optical stores across Mexico and now in several other Latin American countries.”

“So what brings you here?” This time it was Bob who asked the question.

“Rotary. I’m serving as president of Rotary International this year and am supposed to speak at a big event tonight honoring some of our major supporters of The Rotary Foundation.”

“Rotary?” said Bob, with a puzzled look. “What’s Rotary?”

But before I had a chance to answer, the cab driver startled us all by announcing we had arrived at the station. We had been so engrossed in conversation that we had not even noticed the fog had thinned to a light mist. I paid the cab driver, and having learned we were destined for the same train, the three of us walked together to the ticket

office. Five minutes later we found our platform, where the train was waiting.

I think we already sensed a certain kinship that comes from people who are thrown together in times of adversity. An hour earlier I was frustrated at having my well-planned schedule disrupted. Then chance put me alongside two really nice people—I won't call them strangers because I believe strangers are only friends we have yet to meet.

The conductor told us the journey would take three and a half hours. As we boarded the train, we knew we need not ask whether we should sit together. We walked through the corridor searching for an empty compartment as the train lurched forward; none of them had three empty seats. Finally, near the back of the train, there was a compartment with just one man among the six seats. "Looks like this is it," said Sue.

"So!" I said. "You asked me, 'What is Rotary?' Before I answer, let me turn the question around. Bob, what do you think Rotary is?"

Bob reflected for several seconds, rubbing his right hand across the light stubble he was cultivating on his chin. "Isn't it, like, the Chamber of Commerce or something? Is the Rotary the same as Lions? I think my girlfriend's father is in Rotary. I've heard of the Rotary club, and I remember seeing their signs outside hotels and on the highway, but I have no real idea what it is or what it does."

"Sue, what do you think a Rotary club is?"

"While I was in high school, I won an essay contest. It was on how we should each do our part

to help society, and it was sponsored by Rotary. Consequently, I had to read my essay at the local Rotary club to receive the prize. I was terrified of speaking to a group back then—of course, now, you can't shut me up," she said with a laugh. "Anyway, I practiced my talk over and over again, and on the big day I remember a bunch of old men all wearing name badges. It was a Who's Who of our town. The bank manager, the mayor, Mr. Schmidt of Schmidt's Supermarkets was there. So was Father Emil of St. Mary's Church, the police chief...like I said, there were a lot of influential people there. But what I've never forgotten is that halfway through my speech, I heard the sound of snoring. I looked up, and there was one of the members, sound asleep. That was over 30 years ago, but when I think of Rotary, I still think of an old boy's club—and the guy who slept through my speech."

I suddenly became aware of the man whose solitude we had interrupted. Far from seeming upset at our occupation of his previously-private compartment, he seemed genuinely interested in what Sue was saying. Our eyes met.

"Hi! I'm Frank Devlyn," I said offering my hand across the aisle.

"Duncan Thorpe," he said, as he grasped my hand in a firm, vigorous shake. He was an older man, maybe 65 or 66; tall, thin, and with a body that looked like the reward for years of regular exercise and healthy eating. I filled him in on who we were and how we came to be riding the train together.

“You can keep your jet planes,” said Duncan, with a dismissive wave. “I spend 43 years in the rat race, running for planes, hoping for upgrades, worrying about how delays would mess up my meeting plans. I used to wonder what it was like to ride the rails. Now I ride the trains by choice. I retired last year from DuPro Chemical Company. My second wife passed away six years ago and I love to travel, to experience life and this beautiful country. So I buy a senior citizen rail pass and go where I want to go, when I want to go there. I’ve finally found out how to make the journey as interesting as the destination—just as with life itself.

“Ah, a philosopher, too, eh?” I said, with a smile.

“So how would you describe Rotary, Frank,” asked Bob, his left-brain personality bringing the conversation back to where it had been heading before we met Duncan.

“You know, if somebody wanted to describe Sue’s former employer, South American Airways, you might get different answers. One might say, ‘I’m a proud citizen, and this is my national airline. They understand my language and culture.’ Another might answer, ‘It’s got the best service in the air,’ and others, ‘South American Airways has the best fares,’ or, ‘South American Airways’ pilots are the safest,’ or, ‘I fly them because their flight attendants are fabulous.’ All of these people would be right. They have different perceptions of South American Airways, depending on their personal experiences with the company.

“Rotary is the same. It began almost 100 years ago, in 1905, when a young lawyer moved

to Chicago to establish his practice. It was a dog-eat-dog business environment back then and he yearned for the friendly, trustworthy way of life he had witnessed in the tiny Vermont village of his upbringing. So he started a club where business and professional people could become friends. It soon became an oasis of companionship in a desert of corruption and greed.

“It was the first of what some would today call networking clubs. Who wouldn’t want to buy a suit from the tailor who had befriended you? And of course, if you were that tailor, you would buy your coal from the coal merchant in your Rotary club, and so on. They didn’t have to trade with one another, they wanted to. Pretty soon, other people in the community wanted to do business with those merchants who promised fair and ethical treatment for all, and the Rotary Code of Ethics was adopted by dozens of trade associations across the United States and in many other countries. That’s what we call Vocational Service. Rotarians act as ethical lighthouses, bright beams of integrity that are seen throughout their community and around the world.

“Rotarians have for almost 100 years cared deeply about their communities. It was Rotary that launched the crippled children’s work which today is known as the Easter Seals Society. There are more than 30,000 Rotary clubs in large cities and small villages around the globe, and in every one of them the club is building parks, caring for the needy, working with kids, and undertaking tens of thousands of projects every year to make those

towns a better place to live and work. That is our outreach we call Community Service.

“But you know, I should also mention that in addition to all those Rotary clubs, we have auxiliaries, typically made up of spouses and family members of Rotarians that undertake millions of hours of volunteer service on countless projects in their local communities as well as for international projects. Then we have 6,650 Interact clubs in 130 countries—that’s like Rotary in high schools, and Rotaract, comprised of young adults, has 6,500 clubs in 146 countries with an 150,000 members. And in some countries local Rotary clubs sponsor Rotary Community Corps groups that also do invaluable local community service work.

“International Service has been a focus of Rotary since the early 1920s. It was Rotary that was the driving force to establish UNESCO. Rotarians were invited to participate in the founding of the United Nations. Rotarians in South America accomplished what governments could not: they literally brought together warring sides in a bitter border conflict between two countries and worked out a peace arrangement. Today, the jewel in our crown is what we call PolioPlus: Rotary’s gift to the world for our 100th anniversary in 2005. We have immunized two billion children against polio since 1988 and have reduced the number of polio cases by more than 90 percent. We have eliminated polio completely in the Western Hemisphere, Europe, Western Pacific and China. By 2005, we will have wiped the disease off the face

of the earth. And because Rotary has no political or religious ties, many countries in the midst of civil war have declared ‘Days of Tranquility,’ during which we went in and immunized every single child.

“Sue, you mentioned receiving a prize from a local Rotary club when you were a student. That’s barely scratched the surface of what Rotary does to help young people’s education. A Rotary Foundation scholarship is worth about \$25,000 and we award roughly 1,200 of them every year. In my year as president of Rotary International, we’ve spent more than \$25 million in educational scholarships—and that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

“But Rotary starts in the local club. And we emphasize Club Service so that the original intent of good fellowship, fun, camaraderie, and friendship is still accomplished. Personally, I had lots of friends before I joined my local Rotary club in 1970, but the best friends I’ve ever had have come as a result of my Rotary membership.

“So Bob, we’re not a Chamber of Commerce, per se. But we are a group of business and professional leaders who can make things happen in our communities—both local and far away. And Sue, you’ll be happy to know we stopped being an ‘Old Boy’s Club’ many years ago. There are many women members—even club presidents and district governors—nowadays. And I doubt anybody will fall asleep when you address the Rotary club meeting now.”

“I had no idea the Rotary club did all that,” Bob admitted. “It’s as if Rotary clubs and Rotarians are the community’s best-kept secret.”

“It’s true that in the past many Rotarians and their clubs preferred to do their service work quietly. They didn’t want to blow their horns,” I explained. “But that is changing. We’ve got a great story to tell and we’re proud to tell it. We know that there are a lot of people out there who would make wonderful Rotarians if they only knew what the organization does. Speaking of which, would you be interested in joining Rotary?”

There was a palpable change on their faces.

“I had the chance once,” Duncan replied. “I’m retired, so I guess I’ve missed the opportunity.”

“I’d love to, but there’s no way I could. Not right now,” Sue declared.

“Me neither. No way,” said Bob.

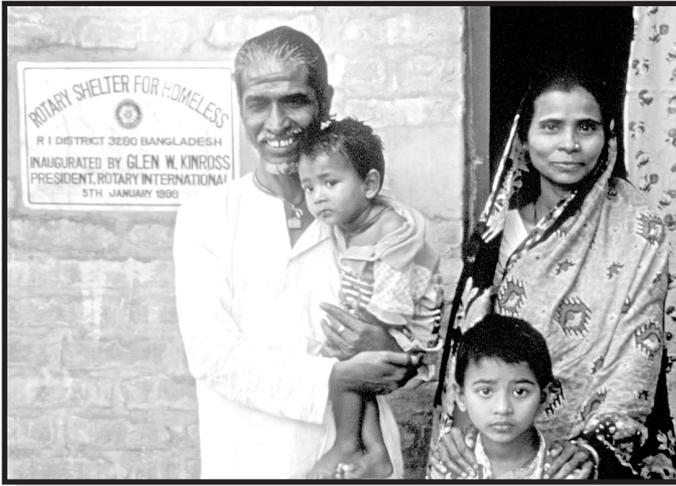
I remember thinking, in that flash that takes all of a split second to reach the brain: “How could these people not be jumping at the opportunity? Rotary would change their lives for the better, and they would be wonderful additions to the clubs in their communities. I wonder what I have to do to get them beyond saying ‘That’s nice,’ to making them enthusiastic about joining.”

And so I decided to come right out and ask them.

“Why do you say that?”

My most memorable Rotary experience happened the first week in January 1992. My Rotary Club of Shrewsbury was one of 6 Rotary Clubs that started and sponsored the first Rotary Club in Kiev, Ukraine. The clubs involved were from Vancouver, B.C; Edinburgh, Scotland; Toronto, Canada; Washington, Michigan, and Shrewsbury, Ma. USA. One member from each club met every six months for two years. Each club representative agreed to visit Kiev on a six month rotating basis. My turn was set for the first week of January 1992. A Rotary meeting of the Provisional Kiev Club was set for Tuesday. My arrival on Sunday was complicated by a message that "Tuesday meeting was canceled." A meeting was held the following Saturday with 65 enthusiastic new Rotarians. Why Memorable? I was a visiting Rotarian to a country of 52 million that just declared Independence from the USSR. Introduction of the first Rotary Club in over 70 years, and the Tuesday meeting was canceled because, for the first time in over 70 years the Orthodox Christmas was declared a National Holiday.

**—Arthur R. Dobson
Past Club President
Rotary Club of Shrewsbury
Shrewsbury, Ma. USA**



Voluntary contributions to The Rotary Foundation, along with volunteer service time by Rotarians, built and operate this homeless shelter in Bangladesh.



A Rotary volunteer explains the importance of a balanced diet at this Rotary World Community Service nutrition project.