

Foundation Alumni: A Tremendous Resource

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Rotary Foundation Alumni are a tremendous resource for Rotary. There are more than 90,000 people in the world who are considered alumni of The Rotary Foundation's programs. But we know only a small percentage of them ever participate in Rotary club projects, become Rotarians, or ever contribute to The Rotary Foundation. We need that to change. Let's eliminate our own outdated perceptions about Rotary Foundation alumni. They should not be forgotten. They *are* The Rotary Foundation. And they are members of our Rotary family.

What always impresses me about our alumni is that they all have tremendous stories to tell. They talk about their life-changing experiences as ambassadorial scholars, Group Study Exchange (GSE) participants, or volunteers. They are compelling advocates for our Foundation.

When you need to convince Rotarians of the value of Rotary Foundation programs, nothing works better than having one of our alumni share his or her experiences and thank our Foundation and their sponsoring Rotary club. When alumni share with us their compelling stories, it makes Rotarians proud of what their Foundation has done to inspire these people.

Recently, a group of Rotarians dedicated to Foundation alumni – the Rotary Foundation Alumni Coordinators (formerly known as the Foundation Alumni Resource Group) – met in Skokie, Illinois, USA. My two charges to them were:

1. We need a better return on investment from our alumni, and,
2. We need to make alumni an integral part of Rotary.

Those two goals apply to every Rotary club and district. So I encourage you to spend more time in working with your alumni. Get involved by contacting your district Foundation alumni chair and your [Foundation alumni coordinator](#).

Around the globe, there are great examples of our alumni in action. But at the same time, we also know that alumni are not a priority for most Rotary clubs and districts around the world. Alumni seem to have simply fallen through the cracks. But friends, a Foundation scholarship now costs US\$26,000; a GSE team is \$11,000. We invest in these individuals. And then we ignore the investment. It just doesn't make good business sense.

We also know that many scholars or GSE team members, when they return from their time abroad, will perhaps give one or two talks to local clubs, or, if it's a GSE team, will speak at district conference. But then their sponsoring Rotary club never contacts them again. What is worse is that we lose contact and our connection with these people who have benefited from our programs. Most alumni do not like this and neither do I. Most alumni want to continue to be a part of Rotary because Rotary taught them the joy and art of giving back and making a difference to others.

Friends, I have often heard the criticism that our alumni do not give back to Rotary. They simply take our money and walk away. I know this is not true.

Steve Hollingworth is a former Ambassadorial Scholar, sponsored by Rotarians in Elgin Illinois in 1980. He went to Manchester, England, to study international development. The experience with Rotary convinced him that he should dedicate his life to helping the poorest of the poor. After graduating, he went to work for the relief agency CARE international. He later worked in Malawi, Bolivia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and since 2002 has been the director of CARE India.

India is home to 1 billion people, many of them living on less than \$1 a day. As director of CARE India, Steve oversees a \$60 million budget for aid programs that reach some 6.5 million people. Their projects are like Rotary's humanitarian grants: they focus on health, on educating women, and on economic development — specifically micro-credit loans to poor women to help them achieve economic self-sufficiency. They have been highly successful in repeating the kind of success the Grameen Bank has achieved in Bangladesh. In addition, they are a disaster relief agency. When the tsunami hit the Tamil Nadu region of Southern India last December, CARE was one of the primary agencies that moved in to help victims of the disaster.

So I ask you: In 1980, when Rotarians in Illinois selected Steve Hollingsworth to be a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholar and the Foundation invested \$12,000 in Steve Hollingsworth, was that a good investment? Has Rotary seen a positive return on investment from that lone scholarship award? Has Steve Hollingsworth made a difference to many people?

In some parts of the world, alumni have formed associations and communicate with each other via e-mail and meet on a regular basis. They develop a friendship and their own service projects in addition to supporting their clubs and district. They are included — not excluded from Rotary activities. This is the model that should be seen in every district.

This past October, during the Trustees' meeting in Evanston, Illinois, it was my great pleasure to honor three Rotarians who made substantial gifts to The Rotary Foundation. One was a former Ambassadorial Scholar who became a Rotarian and continues to serve, and the other two were former GSE team leaders. Together, the three gifts totaled more than US \$1.5 million. These alumni wanted to thank The Rotary Foundation for the life-changing experiences they had. We are certainly grateful for their extraordinary generosity. And I am convinced there are more alumni like them. We have to find them and give them an opportunity to be a part of our organization. We have to reconnect them to Rotary, and then we have to ask. Certainly, most alumni would appreciate the opportunity to make an annual contribution of a \$100 or more every year.

Amigos, I ask you *Create Awareness* of our Foundation Alumni and *Take Action* to make them active members of our family of Rotary. The rewards will be more than we ever expected.

Your Amigo in Mexico City,

Frank Devlyn

The Rotary Foundation Trustee Chair, 2005-06
Past Rotary International President, 2000-01