

THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING

On the eve of Rotaract's 50th birthday, Rotaract Australia chair Rebecca Fry writes there is more that unites Rotarians and Rotaractors than divides them.

Last month, I was deeply inspired by the words of Rotary International president elect Barry Rassin. During his inaugural speech at the International Assembly in San Diego, *Be the Inspiration*, Barry outlined four key areas of focus for 2018-19: Take care of our members, increase engagement, protect the environment and have Rotaract become a vital force (*RDU* February, page 10). Barry also emphasised the importance of strategy in growing Rotaract, to ensure long-term sustainability and ultimately growth in Rotary.

In this edition, I thought I'd answer a critical topic I am sometimes faced with in my travels: "Can't Rotaract clubs just become Rotary clubs? Why does Rotaract need to exist?" To the former point, Rotaract clubs can, of course, become Rotary clubs, however, it's critical to understand the importance of the second question before considering this direction.

At the heart of people's involvement in any initiative is a sense of belonging. In the same way Rotarians feel a sense of belonging to their personal Rotary club, Rotaractors feel a sense of belonging to their



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Rotaract club. Broadly speaking (and whether we like it or not), humans are resistant to change. We are even more resistant to change when our sense of belonging is threatened. As an organisation, we are talking a lot about Rotary clubs resisting change, but it helps to appreciate that Rotaractors are also apprehensive of change. But what change are we each concerned with?

Many Rotarians enjoy their weekly meetings, which can include a meal, the opportunity for fellowship and an interesting guest speaker. This format was essential during the initial stages of Rotary, when face-to-face contact was critical for making connections. Before this digital age, the only way to see someone speak was to physically be in the room, and while there are many advantages for continuing this format, there are many opportunities technology enables that Rotary is beginning to explore.

Millennials, however, were born into this digital age. To them, connecting virtually is almost second nature, and it is through this format that they are choosing to spend their time. Younger leaders desire the flexibility to choose how to engage.

They desire the choice of having a meal at a meeting, they crave dynamic meeting content (with powerful speakers readily available on online platforms such as YouTube and TED Talks, this can mean alternatives to guest speakers) and redefining how they can meaningfully contribute to their club.

But for these differences, there is a core element that Rotarians and Rotaractors share. Rotaractors want a sense of belonging. While millennials are more connected than ever before, there is no substitute for community. Rotaract is fundamentally a symbol for young people who want to create a positive difference in their community. Rotaractors find a sense of belonging in Rotaract because they are surrounded by others in their generation who share similar needs. And while there may be a great sense of belonging within clubs, it is this sense of autonomy that can prevent people from reaching out across clubs, and so barriers are inadvertently created.

There is so much more we can accomplish if we can identify our differences and understand each other's needs, while remembering our shared vision of *Making a Difference* in our community.

March marks Rotaract's 50th birthday, and to celebrate this





LEFT: Members of the Rotaract Club of Macquarie University, NSW, during the annual Australian Rotaract Games. **BELOW:** On the campus of the University of North Carolina, US, members of the world's first Rotaract club inaugurate a new, long-term project: They will plant a young tree to honour each new Rotaract country and its first club. On hand to represent the Rotary Club of Charlotte, US, are Rotaract committee chairman Bill Kemp, left, and chairman of the District 767 Rotaract-Interact committee Charles Grier, right.

milestone, I encourage every Rotarian to connect with a Rotaractor in an effort to bring our groups closer together. Similarly, I challenge every Rotaractor to connect with a Rotarian and share the positive impact Rotaract has had on your life. In doing so, I truly believe we will appreciate that there are more things that unite us than divide us.

A national celebration for the 50th birthday will take place in Sydney on the evening of March 17, following the Presidential Peace Conference. Whether you're already an advocate for Rotaract or still on the fence, we would love to bring everyone together for a vibrant evening to celebrate this milestone and envisage what the next 50 years may bring! Visit www.humanitix.com/event/rotaract-50th-birthday/ for details.

Further to highlighting Rotaract as a vital force, over the next few editions of *RDU*, I'll be sharing additional ideas and insights in the Rotaract pages into what strategic growth in Rotaract would look like, including starting, strengthening or rebuilding Rotaract clubs, millennial engagement and serving with intention. If you have specific questions on these topics or there's another topic you'd like covered, please feel free to reach out to me via chair@rotaract.org.au.



Rotaract celebrates 50 years

Beginnings

On March 4, 1968, a new service program for young adults, called Rotaract, was born. It aspired to develop leadership skills, responsible citizenship through service to the community, high ethical standards across occupations, and promote international understanding and peace.

Membership was open to men and women aged 17 through to 25, many decades before women were eligible to be Rotarians. Sponsoring Rotary clubs were responsible for selecting and inviting young people of good character to join.

The very first Rotaract club was launched by the Rotary Club of North Charlotte in North Carolina, US. By the end of March, six additional clubs had been established in Mexico, Italy, India, Argentina and the US.

Rotaract was not the first youth group organised by Rotarians. As early as 1935, Paul Harris encountered youth organisation Apex in Australia, based on Rotary principles, with the first starting in