



A TALE OF TWO NATIONS

On the field, Australia and the United Kingdom have always shared a close sporting rivalry, but *in* the field Rotary collaborations are kicking mutual humanitarian goals for the two great nations.



Aussie exchange proves life-changing for RIBI president

Debbie Hodge is this year's president of Rotary in Great Britain and Ireland (RIBI), but Australia has a very special place in her heart.

Soon after becoming a Rotarian, the church minister from Ware, north of London, UK, led a Group Study Exchange visit Down Under.

Five Brits – an IT specialist, a nursery nurse, a scenes of crime officer, a policewoman and a radiographer – joined Debbie on a five-week whirlwind tour, based just west of Melbourne, Vic.

The idea of these Rotary-sponsored exchanges was to give young professionals the opportunity to travel, experience another culture and to further their vocation.

These exchanges are now known as Vocational Training Teams, with an emphasis on Rotary's six *Areas of Focus* – peace and conflict resolution, disease prevention and treatment,

water and sanitation, maternal and child health, basic education and literacy, and economic and community development.

"Australia was great fun and they really were a team," Debbie said. "They got to know each other so well that, by the end of the trip, each could do the other's presentation. All have since enhanced their jobs and today we are all connected on Facebook."

Debbie is currently a hospital chaplain, working for the National Health Service coordinating chaplains across England. During her visit to Australia, Debbie focused on community nurses working with churches in their local community.

"Gavin was an IT specialist working on fibre optic technology, who was looking at using infra-red technology for doctors working in the bush," Debbie explained.

"Jo was a nursery nurse teacher, who was writing a degree dissertation on how you teach ecology to three-year-olds. Australia was streets ahead,

so she built her dissertation around the vocational work in Australia.

"Julia was a traffic policewoman, who was fascinated by how the alcohol laws are so much tighter than in the UK. She was invited to speak at the State of Victoria police conference and returned with her confidence boosted.

"Doran was a scenes of crimes officer, who taught the Australians about footprint technology.

"And Emma was a radiographer, who worked at the biggest cancer unit in Melbourne. At the time, Emma's hospital was going to take delivery of a fancy bit of kit, but when she got to Australia they already had it! So she was trained on the new equipment, and when she came back to the UK, Emma had trouble-shooting connections.

"Emma also brought back the simplest idea: When you go for radiotherapy treatment for cancer you have to put on a gown. You wear it for about 10 minutes and then it goes in a laundry. What a waste. In Horsham



Rotary in Great Britain and Ireland president Debbie Hodge

hospital, one of the towns we visited in Victoria, each patient has their own personal gown, there is a rack where the gowns hang, and they only need washing every three weeks.”

The Group Study Exchange culminated when Debbie and the team spoke at the district conference in Mount Gambier, SA.

“I think the trip taught me I could do more than I thought I could,” Debbie said. “I changed my job as a result of the exchange. It taught me I could lead people in Rotary. I wasn’t lacking in confidence before, but now, whether it’s the church or Rotary, I’m not afraid of a challenge.”

That challenge came to pass a few years later, in 2013, when Debbie was district governor hosting an exchange from Auckland.

One of those on the exchange suddenly collapsed and died of a brain haemorrhage on the second week of the visit to England. Because of her Maori heritage, special arrangements had to be put in place for the body to be flown back to New Zealand.

Debbie firmly believes that had she not been on that trip to Australia and later developed the connections through the work in her district, she would have struggled. But, thanks to Rotary connections, the body was repatriated within a week.

And those Rotary connections have come into play more than once.

Attending the Rotary International Convention in Sydney, NSW, in 2014, Debbie’s husband Mike, a past district governor for London, collapsed and was whisked to hospital with a ruptured appendix. The Rotary family wrapped its arms around the Hodges at this difficult time.

“I’ve come to realise that what Rotary mostly does is to change the world one person at a time,” added Debbie.

“The Australia trip was life-changing. It built friendships that are still there, both within the team and with the Australians. The trip taught me that although Rotary is unique to a place, it is the same everywhere, and that if you engage people in the conversation about what Rotary does, they get it.

“The rhetoric of Australia is that it’s a very young country. No, it is a very ancient country, with a heritage that has the power of dream and spirituality that will never go away.

“I hear now that if you say you came out on a convict ship, you are treated as a hero! Australia, most definitely, has a very special place in my heart.” •



BLANKET COVERAGE FOR THE HOMELESS

A partnership between the Rotary Club of Rockdale City, NSW, and Qantas, which repurposes airline blankets to benefit the homeless and disadvantaged, has found its way 16,000km across the globe to provide warmth and comfort to those in need in London and the Home Counties.

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Chair of the 'There Is Hope' Blanket Project Vinod Reddy, right, hands out blankets on the streets of Woolloomooloo, NSW, on a bitterly cold July night. The project – a collaboration between Rotary and Australian airline Qantas – is providing on-board blankets to the homeless on the streets of both Australian and UK cities.





We live in a fast-moving, corporate world, where image is everything and where businesses tend to brand-change as frequently as football clubs sack managers.

But, for Rotary clubs in both the UK and Australia, their work with the homeless has benefited hugely, thanks to re-branding by one of the world's leading airlines.

The re-branding meant Qantas needed to ditch thousands of the blankets it offers passengers on short and long-haul flights, and they wanted to direct them to a good cause.

Initially, these were on-board blankets, which may have had a small blemish or were slightly frayed, but were otherwise in good condition.

The Rotary Club of Rockdale City, 17km south of Sydney, NSW, was at the heart of the "There is Hope Blanket Project" through Vinod Reddy, a volunteer with Qantas, who now heads up the initiative.

"Each blanket is sanitised and dry cleaned before being picked up for

storage, ready to be re-homed for the needy," Vinod said. "The success is dependent on the generosity and big-heartedness on innumerable fronts, primarily from the project's altruistic sponsors."

Along with helping the homeless in Rockdale, the project also focused on Fiji following the devastating Tropical Cyclone Winston.

Fiji Airways carried thousands of blankets freight-free, with inland transport provided by a Fiji-based Rotarian, whose forwarding company delivered the blankets to a major divisional hospital for further distribution to rural hospitals ravaged by the cyclone.

Internationally, blankets have also been distributed to India, Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Papua New Guinea and Sri Lanka.

But now, Qantas, which is going through a re-branding process, has offered Rotary tens of thousands of soft furnishings, including blankets, duvets, headrest covers, mattresses and other items, which are being picked up at Qantas hubs worldwide, including London.

The homeless in the capital and Home Counties are benefiting. Mike Hodge, past district governor of Rotary London, and husband of current Rotary in Great Britain & Ireland President, Debbie, has been closely working on the UK end of the project with Tony Sharma, from Rotary Tower Hamlets and Himanshu Jain from Rotary Stratford.

In February, Tony, Himanshu and their team were at Gatwick Airport collecting 1100 blankets, quilts and some baby equipment from Qantas's first-class section, which were then transported from West Sussex to a Gurdwara in Forest Gate in east London.

From there, these items were distributed to 20 Rotary clubs in the capital that had links with homeless charities and night shelters. It was a major logistical exercise involving initial transportation, storage and distribution.

Then, in May, Qantas announced they had more than 8000 soft furnishings from business and economy class to distribute.

In addition, they provided over 10,000 items of crockery and cutlery, which was being replaced with lighter plates, knives, forks and spoons to help the airline save on fuel. The kitchen gear is being directed towards night shelters, soup kitchens, rehousing projects and community café projects run by clubs in the region.

"It is a project that came out of the blue," admitted Mike. "It was not one where someone had an idea and we had to work on it. This was a case of 'how can you make the idea work?'. My attitude is always 'why not?' and then I think about how."

A call went out again to clubs in London and the Home Counties that could make use of the blankets and other items.

Further storage was found in Barking, Essex, in an industrial container owned by a Rotarian. Such were the numbers, that some of the goods ended up in Mike and Debbie's living room in Hertfordshire.

However, by the time the blankets have reached the homeless charities, they will be ready for when the colder nights set in.

"It has been a challenge, but it has been a great effort," Mike added.

"For a logistics company, what we achieved would have been a doddle. But we didn't have permanent storage, we didn't have a fleet of vans, we were having to rely on Rotarians pulling together.

"I don't know whether this will be a one-off. Maybe we might benefit from other companies re-branding, and if that ever proves to be the case, then we might have to think about finding more permanent storage facilities."

This project has exemplified the international reach of Rotary. An introduction through Rotary friends 16,000km apart has instigated a project with Rotarians in 40 clubs working together alongside 58 local charities supporting those in need. •