

THE MOUSE THAT ROARED: THE FIGHT FOR WOMEN IN ROTARY

Guest speaker at the 2018 Rotary International pre-Convention Peace Conference, Sylvia Whitlock, made history when she became Rotary's first female club president in 1987. This is her story, and the story of the tiny Californian club that changed the face of service clubs around the world.

Photos: Alyce Henson / Rotary International

Sylvia's position as principal at a school first led her to Rotary. She took up the job after completing college in New York City and working for the United Nations for 10 years. She then fell in love with California, where she completed further studies and a doctorate. While working as an elementary school principal in Duarte, California, Sylvia was invited to join the history-making Rotary Club of Duarte.

The club had checked that the district governor thought it was acceptable to invite women to their club. He replied, "Sure, but don't tell anyone!" Female members were listed in club records by their initial, so no one at head office would know their gender.

"Joining the Rotary club for me was everything I needed to do to be a member of that community," said Sylvia. "It really introduced me to humanitarian service, to serving other people, and it made the world a much smaller place, easier to navigate – and brought a lot of joy and a lot of experience."

Following a club event attended by officials from Rotary International, it was discovered the women present were designated members. After they returned to Evanston, the club received notification they could either ask the women to leave or stop calling themselves a Rotary club.

"The male Rotarians, who knew how important the women were to the club, said, 'We want the women to stay'. They tried to appeal the case to their board of directors – but they only listened to Rotary clubs, and if you had women you weren't a real Rotary club," Sylvia said.

In March 1978, Rotary International revoked the charter of the Duarte club and terminated its membership

in Rotary International. In response, the club members decided to just put a big "X" over their sign, and from then on it was known as the X Rotary Club of Duarte. Yet they continued to operate as usual, creating thanksgiving baskets for the needy and working with an orphanage in Mexico, among other projects.

Meanwhile, the president of the nearby Rotary Club of Arcadia, Samford Smith, said he thought the decision could be challenged in the Californian courts, leading the Rotary Club of Duarte to file suit. Rotary International's first response was to petition the suit not be heard, on the basis that not all Rotarians were Californians. However, the court ruled it would be heard at the California Superior Court – but in the end decided Rotary International was right: they didn't have to have female members.

However, the X Rotary Club of Duarte wasn't done yet. They received advice they needed to approach it not as a membership issue, but instead as a civil rights issue. California law includes the Unruh Act, which prevents discrimination in public accommodation.

Rotary clubs were covered by this act, as they accommodated people for fellowship and business interests – at the time, around 80 per cent

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of all memberships were paid for by employers. By limiting participation in Rotary, it could be reasonably argued women were locked out of service and professional opportunities. Assisted by the American Civil Liberties Union, they appealed on these grounds.

The result came back: Rotary clubs could not discriminate against women joining Rotary and would have to accept female members.

At one stage, Sylvia overheard a group of Rotarians discussing the case. The District Governor at the time said, "This is going to be over when Rotary appeals. This is just a case of the mouse that roared."

"We already had a banner that said X Rotary Club of Duarte – so we then added to the bottom 'The Mouse That Roared,'" said Sylvia.

"Rotary, every step of the way, said, 'No, we're not going to accept women members'. So, they appealed to the California Supreme Court," Sylvia said. "But they wouldn't hear the case, saying they were satisfied with the findings, so Rotary International appealed the United States Supreme Court."

However, the United States Supreme Court supported the previous decision, ruling on May 4, 1987 that Rotary had to accept women – and so did all other service clubs – leading to widespread changes across the country, which later changed standards across the world.

Sylvia made history by becoming the world's first female Rotary club president that same year.

"I was no longer S. Whitlock. I was Sylvia Whitlock. Now women everywhere could go right in. When the Rotary Constitution was first



written, it was written for 'People of integrity'. It morphed to 'Men of integrity'. Now it's back to 'Persons of integrity'."

Sylvia arrived at work the day the decision was announced to find press from across the nation converged on the school grounds. The Rotary Club of Duarte was forced to find a new

location for their next meeting in order to accommodate the enormous number of people and media who wished to attend.

"We had some interesting telephone calls, including one person who asked if the food would be any better now women were in Rotary. I replied, 'Well, we're not cooking!' Some were

If your club would like help to improve your club inclusiveness, resulting in a membership base that is more representative of your community, email editorial@rotarydownunder.com.au with the subject "membership help" and we will refer you to the appropriate person for guidance.

decidedly less pleasant."

Yet despite the progress made, over three decades later, Rotary still faces challenges integrating women fully into Rotary. Women constitute 22 per cent of Rotarians worldwide, with these figures somewhat higher in Western nations with greater gender equality. Australia has 27 per cent female members and New Zealand has 25 per cent.

Sylvia believes Rotary needs to keep working until this figure is better.

"We're a reflection of the larger community. When we talk about diversity in Rotary, this includes having males and females, as well as representatives from all ethnic and age groups.

"Rotary International has put out a statement saying a club that represents its community in diversity, in gender, in ethnicity and in culture, is a club that will be successful in the world.

So, Rotary is trying to encourage that kind of look at what clubs are doing."

Sylvia recalls that not that long ago, there was a club in New Jersey that, at the time, still didn't have any women members, and Rotary was threatening to take its charter. At the time they said they couldn't find capable women – Sylvia and her colleagues were thinking

of transferring their membership there to see what they would say!

She believes, on the whole, unconscious bias is likely responsible for holding back recruitment of women members, rather than intentional discrimination.

"When thinking of inviting someone capable to join Rotary, some may not think it might be a woman. Yet women do the same kinds of work men do today... I think it's about being aware. It's about getting men to stop and look around to see if there are women they can invite capable of doing the work required to be a good Rotarian."

Sylvia says acceptance of history and taking the time to acknowledge and correct the mistakes of the past is vital to moving forward. She described her recent trips as a guest of three Rotary clubs in Texas, Mississippi and North Carolina in America's South: "For me, it was fascinating to see the diversity in clubs in the heart of Dixie. Actually, those clubs were more diverse than any clubs I have seen in California.

"The news that grabs our attention today has a lot to do with what is largely a denial of the diverse people we are. People are still being segmented by race, colour, creed, ethnic origin, religious persuasion and sexual orientation. As Rotarians, with a worldwide presence, we are conveniently situated to affect change and we can do it through conscious inclusion," Sylvia said.

"I've learned over the years that my community is not just the residential community in which I live, or the town that governs it, or the state that supports it. We are citizens of the world, where every action, however remote or seemingly far removed, has a ripple effect on us – to the extent that if others are well, we are well. I believe it is Rotary's responsibility to be an example of change. It begins with all of us looking around for opportunities to be more inclusive. All together it builds to something. Enough drops of water and they build to a flood." •

Sylvia Whitlock Leadership Award

The Sylvia Whitlock Leadership Award was created in 2017. The inaugural award was presented to Sylvia Whitlock, and the first recipient was past Rotary International trustee, Carolyn Jones of Alaska.

The Sylvia Whitlock Leadership Award recognises individual Rotarians, both women and men, who mentor, inspire and champion women to reach their full potential.

The 2018 award was presented at the Toronto Convention to a Rotarian who works tirelessly to make our world a better place. She is dedicated to elevating women and children and is truly a voice for all of humanity – past Rotary International vice president, Dean Rohrs.

Dean is from the Rotary Club of Langley Central in British Columbia.

Dean and her husband Rhino own Rhide Technologies Inc., which supplies soil stabilisation products for road construction. Earlier in her professional career, she was a nurse in Cape Town, South Africa, working as part of Dr Christiaan Barnard's heart transplant team.

From 1959 to 1990, she was active in the Red Cross in South Africa. She has also served on the board of the West End Seniors Network and currently serves on the board of a girls' school in Malawi.

For more information or to nominate a Rotarian for the 2019 Sylvia Whitlock Leadership Award, contact past Rotary International vice president Jennifer Jones via jennifer.jones@rotary.org.