




# THE PAST IS PROLOGUE





Mark in the offices of  
Blackburn, Maloney  
and Schuppert, the  
law firm started by  
his father-in-law.  
(Photo: Cary Norton/  
Rotary International)

For nearly 40 years, Mark Daniel Maloney and his family have demonstrated that Rotary connects the world. Now, the self-described “cheerful traveller” embarks on the next phase of his life’s journey: serving as Rotary International’s new president.

By Geoffrey Johnson

It’s two weeks before Christmas in northern Alabama, US, and the Rotary Club of Decatur is in full Yuletide mode. Last Saturday, working alongside members of the Church at Stone River, the club members treated more than 70 children to a pancake breakfast and a shopping trip to Target. Now, at the club’s Monday meeting, the Austin Junior High jazz band is rocking the seasonal songs: “Santa Baby,” “Feliz Navidad,” “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” – though with temperatures nudging up against 4.5°C, it feels, for early December, borderline balmy.

Once the band wraps up, club president Larry Payne announces, “Now, back by unpopular demand: Where in the world is Mark?” The crowd hoots and hollers with amiable scorn. The man in question strides to the front of the room and proudly declares, “Mark Maloney is in Decatur, Alabama!” Some 120 people cheer wildly. Hail to the chief.

In its coverage of the Rotary-sponsored shopping trip, the *Decatur Daily* had quoted Mark and called him a “club member,” which, while not inaccurate, was inadequate in that it

failed to capture the breadth of the man's accomplishments. Since joining Rotary in 1980, Mark has served as (deep breath) district governor, RI director, presidential aide, Rotary Foundation trustee, and chair of the Council on Legislation and the 2014 Sydney Convention Committee – and that's only a few of the offices he has held, all of them prologue to his new leadership role: president of Rotary International.

"He's so qualified to be RI president," says Bill Wyker, who has known Mark for nearly 40 years. "He's a great communicator and has a brilliant mind; he's compassionate and cares about people. I mean, you've got the whole package. Nobody in our club is surprised at him going all the way to the top of the mountain."

Bill, who succeeded Mark as president of the Decatur club in 1986, lays claim to starting the club tradition of playfully teasing his predecessor. "I spawned the original 'Give Mark a Hard Time' culture within our club, which is still alive and thriving today," he says. "And Mark embraced that; he encouraged it. It became his mode of operating. The club loves it – and of course you don't kid somebody like that unless you really love them and respect them."

Speaking from the lectern at that December meeting, Mark, who has described himself as "the most cheerful traveller," explains where in the world he has been of late. He describes a global jaunt that began with his "going east by way of Nevada and California" – and thence to England, India, Singapore, Indonesia, and Taiwan, before finally flying home to Decatur. But Mark's longer journey to this particular place and point in time actually began long ago in a country that, a century before passenger jets, lay far, far away.

With three young children to feed and the prospect of rich farmland across the Atlantic, Arthur and Catherine Maloney left Ireland in 1849 in the midst of the Great Famine

and sailed for the United States. (The couple left behind two older children, one of whom they would never see again.) After landing in New Orleans, they travelled north to Gallatin County in southern Illinois. They landed in a place called Pond Settlement, where they made their home among other Irish Catholic immigrants.

Mark Daniel Maloney was born 106 years later, on May 14, 1955. By then, the family farm, situated outside the small town of Ridgway, had grown to 1200 acres. For decades the family had raised beef cattle and grown cattle feed, but Patrick Maloney (Mark's father) and his two brothers shifted the focus to growing corn, wheat and soybeans. They also more than doubled the farm's size when they bought an additional 1500 acres across the Ohio River in Kentucky.

This was the environment in which Mark Maloney grew up, though it quickly became obvious he was not destined for a career in agriculture. At 4-H competitions, the proving ground for future farmers, he would walk away with top honours – for public speaking. His 1966 speech, "A Dream Becomes a Goal," won the blue ribbon at the Illinois State Fair. Two years later, he won the county spelling bee by properly spelling "bludgeon"; two years after that, he was president of the Gallatin County 4-H Federation. And then there was the achievement against which all others paled: In 1962, Mark and his five-year-old sister, Kristi, won the Hawaiian-themed costume contest at Ridgway's annual Popcorn Day.

In Ridgway, the self-proclaimed Popcorn Capital of the World, there was no grander occasion than Popcorn Day, held each year on the second Saturday in September. "Popcorn Day was the town's annual highlight," says former Ridgway resident Rick Rotramel, a member of the Rotary Club of Danville, Illinois. Following a free movie at the Strand and a parade, children gathered at the bandstand for popcorn-eating, bubblegum-blowing,



and frog-jumping contests. Winners took home a silver dollar.

At 1pm, the "mammoth float and band parade" would step off on Main Street; it featured what the local newspaper described as the "Popcorn Queen and her court, bands, floats, drill teams, motor patrols, horses, modern farm equipment, and numerous other outstanding entries!" After the tractor pull – "ITPA rules will apply" (for the uninitiated, that's Illinois Tractor Pulling Association) – the rest of the day was devoted to musical entertainment; everything from Grand Ole Opry to spirituals and gospel music to something called "Teen-A-Go-Go."

That kind of event needs a master of ceremonies, and in 1981 Ridgway turned to Mark Daniel Maloney to handle the responsibility. He has performed the role every year since bar twice: when it coincided with the baptism of his daughter Phyllis, and when he attended a funeral. "That's a weekend [it's now known as Popcorn Days] that's inviolate on my calendar," says Mark, whose licence plate reads PPCRN.





Mark participates in a water filter distribution project last fall in the US Virgin Islands. Mark's and Gay's Rotary clubs, Decatur and Decatur Daybreak, partnered with the Rotary Club of St. Thomas East on the initiative. (Photo: Nicole Canegata)

"Mark hams it up and jokes around," says Rick, who has helped emcee the parade since the mid-1990s. "He's got a good sense of humour. He's going to get the job done, but he's going to have fun doing it.

"Mark and I have the same feeling about our hometown. We're very proud of it. Every year they call and ask if we'll emcee. I say, 'You don't have to call. We will never stop doing this until the day we die.'"

In 1968, as he prepared to graduate from eighth grade, Mark applied to Chaminade, a Catholic prep school in St. Louis. The school offered him a full scholarship, but his parents turned it down: Chaminade was a boarding school, and they weren't ready to let their son go. Instead, they promised to send him to the best college he could get into – as if a kid like Mark needed any more motivation.

Instead of Chaminade, Mark attended Ridgway High School, where his mother, Doreen, taught English. "She was a lot of fun and a hell of a teacher," recalls Rick, who was a year ahead of Mark. "Everybody liked her."

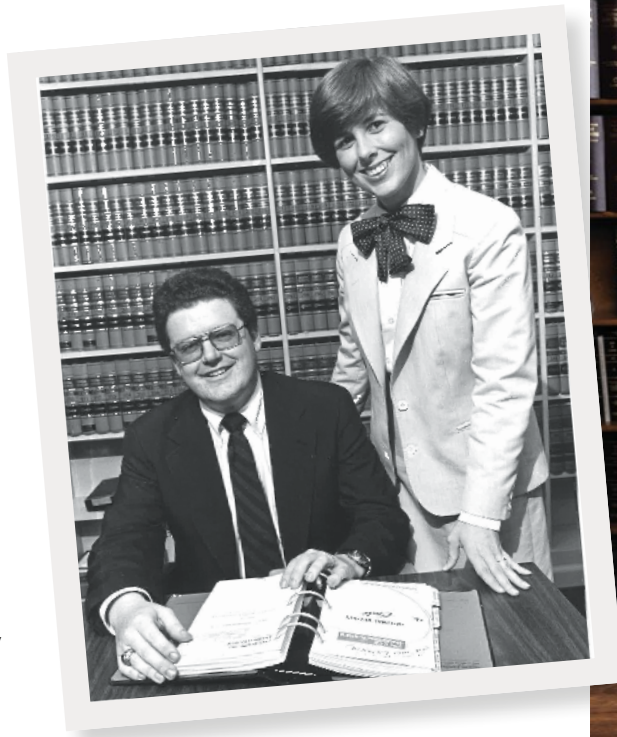
As usual, Mark excelled, and not just academically. He held a number of offices, including president of the student council and member of the student-faculty committee on school policy. While maintaining a prominent role in 4-H, he was also active in the band, chorus, newspaper, yearbook, Spanish club, and the National Beta Club – an academic honours society that promotes good ethical and moral behaviour – where he was a state officer. At graduation, he delivered his class's valedictory address. His classmates went out on a limb and voted him "most likely to succeed". In 1972, the year he graduated from Ridgway High, Mark was recognised as Outstanding Catholic Youth of the Year in his 28-county diocese.

That fall, Mark left for college. His parents had kept their promise to send him to the best school he could get into: Harvard. The spring semester of his freshman year, Mark, who would earn a degree cum laude in history, took a non-credit course that examined the nuts and bolts of state government. The instructor was

Illinois politician Paul Simon, who was spending the year as a fellow at the Institute of Politics at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. The two became friends.

In 1974, Simon won election to the US House. (A pre-election photo in the *Gallatin Democrat* shows Mark, who worked on the campaign, standing alongside the candidate and wearing a black leather jacket, while grinning like the cool cat who swallowed the canary.) The summer after graduation, Mark landed a spot in the House's LBJ Internship Program and worked for two months in Simon's office in Washington, D.C. In announcing the appointment, the *Democrat* noted that at Harvard, Mark had been "president of the Harvard Memorial Society, manager of the football, soccer and lacrosse teams, president of the Undergraduate Managers Council, [and] a member of the Harvard Faculty Committee on Athletics."

In the fall of 1977, Gay Blackburn, in her second year at Vanderbilt Law School, was enrolled in a seminar on international law. A graduate of



**RIGHT: Mark and Gay in 1980, the year he joined Rotary; FAR RIGHT: Mark and Gay, still smiling, 2019. (Photo: Cary Norton/Rotary International)**



Agnes Scott College, Gay was from Decatur, Alabama, where her father, a renowned lawyer, had once been mayor. During class in the second week of the seminar, several students pulled out small bags of popcorn. They had travelled from Nashville to southern Illinois over the weekend and attended something called Popcorn Day. The leader of that expedition had been another of her international law classmates, a young man named Mark Maloney.

A conversation about hometown attractions ensued and led to Mark and Gay dating regularly throughout the fall. During the Christmas break, Gay came up from Alabama to attend a party at the Harvard Club of Nashville, and Mark travelled down to Decatur for the final days of 1977. They closed out the year at the movies watching a Disney film. "We felt like we were a good match," Gay recalls, "both happy to see *Pete's Dragon* on New Year's Eve."

What Mark calls "Gay's first and fateful visit to my family" followed in early February. "Gallatin County had fewer than 8000 people, and a fair number of them were related to the Maloneys," Gay recalls. "Mark and his mother made a conscious effort not to overwhelm me, so I only met 22 of

his relatives." They drove from the Ridgway farm to the farm in Kentucky, travelled to New Harmony, Indiana, for a fancy dinner at the Red Geranium, and played a card game called 500. They stopped at a drugstore to pick up some film, and Gay took pictures of Mark's parents.

Sunday morning, the couple attended Mass in nearby Shawneetown and headed back to Nashville. But first Mark wanted to show Gay old St. Patrick's in Pond Settlement, the Catholic church the Maloneys helped establish in the 1850s. There was too much snow on the ground, but Mark promised that on her next visit they would walk through the cemetery. On the way out of town, they stopped at the Maloney farm so Gay could snap a photo of the house. Mark's parents came out on the porch and waved.

Ten days later, Mark found Gay in the Vanderbilt library. Early that evening, he told her, his parents had been driving on the Ridgway Spur when another car collided with them head-on. Pat, 48, and Doreen, 46, were dead. Gay's pictures were the last photos of them. The accident had occurred on the 21st birthday of Mark's sister Kristi, who had been away at school in New York. His younger sister, Erin, who

had been in the back seat of the car, survived the wreck, though she was seriously injured.

Within weeks, Mark established the Pat and Doreen Maloney Memorial Scholarship Fund at Ridgway High. Around the same time, a notice appeared in the *Gallatin Democrat*. It expressed "deepest and sincerest gratitude" to all those who had stood by the family after their recent loss. "Through this trying time, the love, compassion and support shown to us by the residents of Gallatin County ... has been overwhelming. Our belief in the goodness of man has been reaffirmed."

In the aftermath of the car crash, Gay had introduced herself to the mourners who came to the family home – Paul Simon among them – as "Mark's girlfriend". In fact, she had quickly become far more, and by early April they were engaged. "I think we would have ended up in the same place that we were heading, but the accident sped things up a little," says Gay today.

In their third and final year of law school, the couple wondered where they would go next. "When I went



away to college, I didn't go to Auburn or Alabama," says Gay. "I wanted to go somewhere that was beyond my horizon. So, I went to Agnes Scott in Atlanta." Her feelings hadn't changed. She still wanted to "see some of the world".

But, on a weekend visit to Decatur, Gay's father, J Gilmer Blackburn, took Mark for a drive. "Gilmer explained the benefits of living in a small city and of being in a family law practice," Mark explains. A new prospect opened up for the couple: making their home in Decatur and joining Gilmer's law firm. Gay and Mark debated the possibilities, though, he says, "we were not on opposite sides".

He adds, "When we moved to Decatur, we thought we were doing Gay's parents a favour" – a sentiment Gay, in a separate conversation, echoes in almost identical words. They leave unsaid that the favour was actually going in the other direction. "My father had a vision of what a good life we could have in Decatur," Gay says. "And maybe at the time we didn't fully appreciate that."

"Gilmer was a brilliant individual," says Ken Schuppert, who, along with his wife, Lynn, is a partner/member in the law firm started by Gilmer and now

known as Blackburn, Maloney and Schuppert. (Like the two Maloneys, both Schupperts are Rotarians – and Ken currently serves as vice chair of the Trustees of The Rotary Foundation.) "His expertise in life insurance taxation was so superior and so unusual here. He was the first tax lawyer north of Birmingham in Alabama back in the mid-1950s. But, being involved in the community and paying back your civic rent: That was something we all learned from Gilmer."

"I think Gilmer was actually a very strong father figure in Mark's life," says Bill Wyker, of the Rotary Club of Decatur. "They had a grand, very close relationship."

Bill also has strong memories of Gay's mother. "Phyllis was a pistol," he says. "She supported Gilmer, but she had her own thoughts and ideas and activities and pursuits. And she was fearless. If Phyllis wanted to take on something, then better buckle your chin strap."

Following their marriage in June 1979, and after Mark earned a Master of Laws degree in taxation at New York University, the Maloneys settled in Decatur. With his background in farming, Mark got along immediately with his new

neighbours. "Mark was the perfect combination of a guy who is absolutely brilliant and, yet, at the same time the kind of guy you like as soon as you shake hands with him," Bill says.

"Mark is one of the most dignified, formal people I know," adds Decatur club member Ellen Didier. "It's a surprise to find out how warm he is and how funny. There's a genuineness to his heart, his humility, his wit – and his self-deprecation."

Mark joined Rotary in 1980; five years later, when he was 30, he was president of the Decatur club. That's when he learned that a Rotary-sponsored Group Study Exchange team from Nigeria was slated to visit Alabama – and Decatur wasn't on its schedule. He made some calls, and the visitors from Africa ended up spending two days in Decatur. "We just went



The Maloney family with then-RI president Rajendra Saboo and his wife, Usha, in Decatur in 1991.

all out," Gay remembers. "Mark and I had a party for them at our home, and we made sure they had outstanding hospitality. The team leader said, 'I want that young man to lead the team to Nigeria next year.' So, when our daughters, Phyllis and Margaret, were four and two, Mark was gone for 40 days and 40 nights to Nigeria" – planting the seeds for his presidential theme: *Rotary Connects the World*.

"We'd been told we were ambassadors of goodwill, and to this day I still refer to him as Mr Ambassador," says Mike Curl, one of the six members of the GSE team from Decatur to visit Nigeria. "He was very good with people and picking up on and understanding their culture."

In July 1990, Mark returned to Nigeria, and this time Gay joined him, bringing her college textbook on African art. Mark had previously met Jonathan Majiyagbe, who had just finished his term as Rotary's first black African director. On this visit, Mark and Gay stayed with Jonathan and his wife, Ade, at their home in Kano. "I found Mark to be a very pleasant person," Jonathan says. "He was very hardworking. I call him a mobile computer: He remembers

everything to the minutest detail." A close friendship formed between the couples, and when Jonathan was nominated as 2003-04 RI president, he and Ade chose Mark and Gay to be their aides.

In 2003, less than a month before taking office as president, Jonathan was in Brisbane, Australia, when Ade died unexpectedly in Leeds, England. "I don't know what I would have done without Mark Maloney," Jonathan recalls. "He arranged for my ticket to Leeds, and he and Gay travelled there at their own expense to be by my side. We bonded together. They are my family in Decatur."

Another longtime friend Mark has made through Rotary is his own presidential aide, Larry Lunsford. A member of the Rotary Club of Kansas City-Plaza, Missouri, a past governor of District 6040, and a former RI director, Larry has an impressive Rotary résumé. Yet he's the first to admit that "it's hard to find someone in Rotary who is as experienced as Mark Maloney. He's outstanding at outlining and envisioning the process that can best realise his and Rotary's goals, and he's going to use his organisational and administrative skills to maximise

opportunities to make Rotary even better."

Larry underscores Mark's "strategic focus" on increasing Rotary membership – with an emphasis on "the need for more diversity in our approach" to attracting and retaining members – as well as "the priority Mark has put on elevating our partnership with the United Nations, which creates another way to enhance Rotary's standing in the world." He also notes that "Mark wants an even stronger synergy between Rotary and Rotaractors. Rotaractors are feeling stronger than ever about the possibility of an enhanced relationship with Rotary. Those are winds we hope to fan."

Larry switches gears to identify what he calls "Mark's greatest strength: He just cares. He has a heart of gold – and he has Gay at his side. They're a great team, and Mark benefits from that."

As much as anyone, Gay, the would-be traveller who has likely seen more of the world than she ever expected, appreciates the irony of being able to see her high school from the front door of her house. "I recall thinking, when we returned to Decatur, that we were turning our backs on the opportunities to see the world," she says.

She was mistaken. In the Maloneys' living room, framed photos on the walls, alongside Gay's colourful paintings, document the global scope of their 39-year Rotary journey, as do the mementos crowding the shelves. Gay officially became a member of the Rotary family in 1996, when she joined the newly chartered Rotary Club of Decatur Daybreak. "Mark and I can practise law together, and we can raise our family together," she confesses. "But there is no Rotary club in the world that is big enough for both of us."

The Maloney daughters were as much a part of that Rotary journey as their parents. "As we evolved into a Rotary family, our girls grew up with a broad vision of the world," Gay says. Between them, Phyllis and



Mark and Rick Rotramel, the longtime emcees for Ridgway's annual Popcorn Days, also served as grand marshals of the event's 2017 parade. (Photo: Eddie Quinones/Rotary International)





Rotary's first family, 2019-20: daughters Phyllis and Suzanna, left, grandson Peter, son-in-law Blake, daughter Margaret, Gay, grandson Patrick and Mark. (Photo: Bryan Meltz/ Rotary International)

Margaret have attended more than 30 conventions, and the youthful interactions they had as children with people around the world influenced the course of their lives. Spurred by a childhood interest in geography, Phyllis studied British history and literature at Harvard and the University of Cambridge before earning a law degree from Yale. As a girl, Margaret was fascinated by language and words and went on to study linguistics at Harvard; after a career in publishing in New York City, she's completing her fourth year of medical school at Stony Brook University on Long Island.

In 2014, the Maloneys welcomed Suzanna Greer into their home as their third daughter after the death of her mother. "Because of the tragedy Mark had encountered as a young person, he was particularly empathetic

to Suzanna's situation," recounts Gay. "I told him I'd been thinking of asking her to move in with us, and he said yes right away." Now 25 years old, Greer is a student at the University of South Alabama and a veteran of three Rotary conventions – while Patrick, 7, and Peter, 4, the children of Phyllis and her husband, Blake Johnson, already have two conventions under their belts.

Among the pictures in the Maloney living room are photos of Mark with two popes – not surprising, perhaps, when by some accounts, the name Maloney comes from the Gaelic *Maol dhomhnaigh*, meaning "devotee of the church". He spent 12 years on the finance council at Decatur's Annunciation of the Lord Catholic Church (formerly St. Ann Catholic Church) and 16 years on the St. Ann Catholic School board, just two of the

ways he was active in his church. "You could always rely on Mark," says the Rev. Ray Remke, the former longtime pastor of Annunciation. "If you needed something, he would be there in any way he could. He exemplifies his faith by living it in word and deed."

Mark brings an ecumenical spirit to his faith: He and Gay regularly attend Sunday Mass at Annunciation and services at First United Methodist Church, where Gay and Mark were married and where Mark is an usher. He also participates in a Bible study group that meets weekly at St. John's Episcopal Church. "My father taught me the importance of service to your [church], your family, and your community," says Ronnie Dukes, another Decatur club member. "And Mark obviously does a great job at that."

Indeed, when it comes to his adopted hometown, Mark is a one-man chamber of commerce, and he proudly shows off Decatur to visitors: the Old State Bank, pocked with bullets and mortar shells from the Civil War; the Riverwild playground and splash pad in recently rejuvenated Delano Park, an oasis of green given new life by Rotarians and other citizens; and the Habitat for Humanity development, where each year students from Harvard work during their spring break – a tradition started in 2002 by Phyllis when she was a student there and continued today under the auspices of the Decatur Daybreak club.

Residents of Decatur are equally proud of their hometown hero. "The fact that Decatur, Alabama, should be home to the president of Rotary International," marvels David Breland, a former Morgan County district judge, who now serves as Decatur's resident historian and director of historic resources and events. "We're in the high cotton now."

"Mark's a unique guy, one of the most impressive people I know," Bill says. "I'm tickled to death he's Rotary's next president. He will make his mark." •