

**Everything I Thought I Knew,
But Didn't Really Know,
I Learned From the District Leadership Academy**

When first approached to take part in District 5170's Leadership Academy I hesitated. After all, what did it have to offer me? I thought knew a great deal about Rotary, how it worked, and what its programs were. I had been my Club's new member coordinator, Club Service Director, Secretary, President, and my Area's Community Service FAR, and Assistant Governor, and the District's Club Service Chair. I had been to PETS 4 times, been to every Cabinet meeting for 3 years straight, went to just about every District event, especially the training seminars. I mean, really, what could it possibly have to teach me that I had not already uncovered? The answer was: a great deal. I don't think that there is anything quite as dangerous as someone who thinks that they know it all. It leads to closed minds and missed opportunities. Now, at the conclusion of this course I can safely state: Everything I thought I knew, but didn't know, I learned from the District Leadership Academy.

My journey through the College of Rotary Knowledge started with Course 1, Communications. There is a whole Rotary world out there on the Internet, but, except when you are looking for something specific, who ever goes for a stroll through cyberspace? I think this course has given me an appreciation for the ever so exquisite resources that Rotary provides. I believe the required reading took me to topics that I would never have sought out on my own, but will surely come up sometime in my Rotary career. Even something as mundane as the *Visual Identity Style Manual* I found fascinating. I don't imagine that I will look at a Rotary symbol in the same way again. That includes the way it is used in the DLA logo, which would be discouraged by the manual. This course's web challenge asked us to look up things I would never have thought of researching. Just knowing where to find some of the answers, or even knowing they exist in cyberspace, will encourage me to look there in the future.

The next course was Membership. Ever since I have been in Rotary there has always been the drum beat of getting new members; strategies, planning guides, techniques, goals. The reading reinforced my understanding of the need for vitality, and the essay questions made me reflect, but the opportunity of doing a club satisfaction survey was what I found to be the most interesting. I think that there is a lot to be said about the collateral learning that goes on with this Academy. Sometimes it is about your club, but also your own skills. The satisfaction survey allowed me figure out how to scan the text document into Word from Acrobat Reader, and then reformat it to make sense, and then

add my own Club's personal questions and not just the canned ones. None of this had anything to do with the assignment. It was extra work that I knew would turn out to be useful in the future. The instructor never saw it, but my club did, and reacted to the personalized form much better than they ever would have to some boilerplate questionnaire. My hope is to post my template on the District Club Service website so that other clubs can have easier access to the same process.

The third segment was on RI, District, and Club Organization. The Club Leadership Plan was very heavily discussed. I had a little trepidation that my club, a known non-conforming group, would fall short of expectations when it came to how we might fall in line with revised guidelines. I was pleasantly surprised to see that, while my back was turned, my club's leadership was quietly conforming quite well. We were updating our bylaws, addressing long term goals, keeping our members informed through many channels, grooming leaders for the future through strong committees, and were vital in service and in fellowship. I thought that the only obvious lack was in the area of training. It seemed to me that our members were in the dark about so many of the facets of the Rotary world. Then it struck me that this is what the Leadership Academy was all about for me. It would never be about training me to one day be the next District Governor. It was about me becoming the resource of Rotary knowledge that my club had never had. I was becoming that go-to guy if someone had a question, that Rotary wonk that can give you or find you the answer. Every club needs one, and few have Past District Governors in their ranks to rely on. I was half way through the courses and my vision of why I needed to participate had suddenly come into sharp focus.

Lesson 4, Public Relations, was probably the most foreign to me. I was one of those Rotarians who thought that tooting our own horn was bad form. Service above Self, good deeds will publicize themselves. However this class opened my eyes to the many ways Rotary needs to be proactive in getting the word out about whom we are and what we do. The recent RI initiatives to increase the amount of club-usable resources for download and reproduction makes beginners experts. This is not the sort of material that I would ever gravitate to, but now that I know it exists, I will be able to pass it along. It hadn't even occurred to me that there would be a publication like the *Media Crisis Handbook*, but now that I have read it, I can be prepared.

Class 5 on the Rotary Foundation helped me sort out what the Foundation is, what it does, and who it helps. I think all Rotarians have a clue, but not the in-depth understanding that you come away with here. There are quite a few misconceptions

about the Foundation that the ordinary Rotarian might stumble into, especially about what the money is used for, and where. The essay I chose to write about was one where I was trying to convince a club nay-sayer that funds donated were indeed used in our local community rather than primarily abroad. When I started I was not totally convinced myself. At the end I was quite surprised about how convincing an argument I was able to construct. Rotary information gave me the bricks; personal examples gave me the mortar, and I was able to build a barricade that I thought could withstand the most withering attack.

The final course was on Service Projects and Humanitarian Grants. It was a nice touch to have us fill out a Matching Grant application. I can remember looking at one some years ago and thinking that the Foundation really wanted to hold on to its money if it was forcing clubs to fill out such a long and complicated form. I had not looked at one since. It was a pleasant surprise to find out that the form is so much simpler now. Given the facts and figures provided it was a breeze filling in the information. The exercise demystified an important document that I might have never looked at again. It also erased a long held belief that Rotary was too slow in listening to the suggestions from clubs and individuals for change. Now when asked how easy it is to fill out an application, the standard eye-roll will be replaced by a confident “That’s easy”.

So, now that I am at the end of my studies, was it all worth it? It made me a better Rotarian. It strengthened my Club. It made me more efficient in my service to my District. It showed me the Rotary world outside of my little corner. It showed me that Rotary cares about what I think and is willing to provide me with the most up-to-date and helpful tools to facilitate my success. But more than just that, it proved to me when it comes to Rotary, there is always something left to learn, and what is left to learn is usually surprisingly valuable. Then again, don’t just take my word for it, investigate it for yourself. You will be, as I am, glad you did.

*Final Essay Submitted by
2008 Leadership Academy Graduate*