

## *A Brief History*

The world's first service club, the Rotary Club of Chicago, Illinois, USA, was formed on 23 February 1905 by Paul P. Harris, an attorney who wished to recapture in a professional club the same friendly spirit he had felt in the small towns of his youth. The name "Rotary" derived from the early practice of rotating meetings among members' offices.

Rotary's popularity spread throughout the United States in the decade that followed; clubs were chartered from San Francisco to New York. By 1921, Rotary clubs had been formed on six continents, and the organization adopted the name Rotary International a year later.

As Rotary grew, its mission expanded beyond serving the professional and social interests of club members. Rotarians began pooling their resources and contributing their talents to help serve communities in need. The organization's dedication to this ideal is best expressed in its principal motto: Service Above Self. Rotary also later embraced a code of ethics, called The 4-Way Test, that has been translated into hundreds of languages.

During and after World War II, Rotarians became increasingly involved in promoting international understanding. A Rotary conference held in London in 1942 planted the seeds for the development of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and numerous Rotarians have served as consultants to the United Nations.

An endowment fund, set up by Rotarians in 1917 "for doing good in the world," became a not-for-profit corporation known as [The Rotary Foundation](#) in 1928. Upon the death of Paul Harris in 1947, an outpouring of Rotarian donations made in his honor, totaling US\$2 million, launched the Foundation's first program — graduate fellowships, now called [Ambassadorial Scholarships](#). Today, contributions to The Rotary Foundation total more than US\$80 million annually and support a wide range of [humanitarian grants](#) and [educational programs](#) that enable Rotarians to bring hope and promote international understanding throughout the world.

In 1985, Rotary made a historic commitment to immunize all of the world's children against polio. Working in partnership with nongovernmental organizations and national governments through its [PolioPlus](#) program, Rotary is the largest private-sector contributor to the global polio eradication campaign. Rotarians have mobilized hundreds of thousands of PolioPlus volunteers and have immunized more than one billion children worldwide. By the 2005 target date for certification of a polio-free world, Rotary will have contributed half a billion dollars to the cause.

As it approached the dawn of the 21st century, Rotary worked to meet the changing needs of society, expanding its service effort to address such pressing issues as environmental degradation, illiteracy, world hunger, and children at risk. The organization admitted women for the first time in 1989 and claims more than 90,000 women in its ranks today. Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Rotary clubs were formed or re-established throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Today, 1.2 million Rotarians belong to some 29,000 Rotary clubs in more than 160 countries.

In 1985, Rotary made a historic commitment to immunize all of the world's children against polio. Working in partnership with the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and national governments, Rotary is the largest private-sector contributor in the global polio eradication campaign. Through its [PolioPlus](#) program, Rotary raised more than US\$240 million and will have contributed half a billion dollars to the cause by 2005, the target date for certification of polio eradication and Rotary's centennial year. Rotarians have mobilized hundreds of thousands of PolioPlus volunteers to promote and carry out national immunization days in polio-endemic countries, resulting in the immunization of nearly two billion children worldwide.

Throughout the late 20th century, Rotary International's service program has adapted to the times. Rotary began to address the pressing global issues of environmental degradation with the formation of the Preserve Planet Earth program in 1990. Other programs were formed to address illiteracy, drug abuse, and the needs of both an aging population and the increasing number of children at risk.

Reflecting society in 1905, the organization had been limited to male members and remained so officially until 1989, when the [Council on Legislation](#), Rotary's parliament, voted to eliminate the male-only provision. Today, there are approximately 90,000 women Rotarians worldwide, many of them serving in leadership roles.

Rotary experienced a growth spurt in the early 1990s when it expanded into former Soviet bloc countries following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. Beginning in 1989, clubs in Central and Eastern Europe that had been disbanded for more than 50 years were re-established, and the first Russian Rotary club was chartered in 1990.

Nearly 100 years after Paul Harris and his colleagues chartered the club that would become Rotary International, Rotarians continue to take pride in their history. In honor of the club that first gathered in Room 711, Rotarians have preserved the room in an extensive re-creation of the office as it existed in 1905. For several years, the club maintained the room as a shrine for visiting Rotarians. In 1989, when the Unity Building was scheduled to be demolished, Rotary's 711 Club carefully dismantled the office, salvaging the original interior, including doors and radiators. In 1993, the Board of Directors of Rotary International set aside a permanent home for the restored Room 711 on the 16th floor of RI World Headquarters in Evanston, Illinois.