

Rotary Youth Leadership Awards "RYLA"



If you've been in Rotary for a few years, no doubt you've heard "When I became a Rotarian" stories. The common theme speaks about Rotary becoming more than just attending meetings and going through the routine week to week activities of being a club member. The story involves a Rotarian having a transforming personal experience while engaged in a Rotary service project. Perhaps it was looking into the eyes of a newly mobile wheelchair recipient or the parents of a child who has received surgery to correct a disfiguring birth defect. For myself, it occurred about 10 years ago when I first became involved with District 5490's RYLA program. RYLA is an outstanding experience for each delegate who attends. Every delegate comes away with new skills, added self confidence and an enhanced vision of future possibilities; but each year, for a few delegates, it becomes a fundamentally life changing event.

Their whole world shifts; a light goes on, and suddenly they truly recognize their unique potential. Possibilities they never dreamed of open up and they acquire a new vision of their place in the world. The first time I saw that transformation, and knowing I had a small part in making it happen was for me when I truly became a Rotarian. I've been hooked on the RYLA program ever since.

In presenting RYLA I'll draw on my own experience with the District 5490 program, as well as District 5510's program which I've also attended. Both are very successful RYLA programs and serve as excellent models, however, keep in mind like Rotary clubs RYLA programs come in all flavors, so programs may vary greatly from district to district. There is no one size fits all approach.

RYLA is an intensive training program for community youth leaders. Young people chosen for their leadership potential attend an all-expenses-paid seminar, camp, or workshop to develop and practice leadership skills. RYLA began in 1960 in Australian Districts 258 and 260 and became an official international program of Rotary in 1971. More than half of Rotary districts worldwide now support RYLA programs. Rotary's official description of RYLA goals include:

1. To demonstrate further Rotary respect and concern for youth
2. To encourage and assist selected youth leaders and potential leaders in responsible and effective voluntary youth leadership by providing them with a training experience
3. To encourage continued and stronger leadership of youth by youth
4. To publicly recognize the high qualities of many young people who are rendering service to their communities as youth leaders.

A few fundamental leadership themes are typical;

1. Ethics and Leadership;
2. Importance of communication skills in effective Leadership;
3. Problem-solving and Conflict Management;
4. Rotary's purpose and service to the community;
5. Building self confidence and self-esteem;
6. Elements of community and global citizenship.

The age range for the RYLA program is 14 - 30, however, most organizers choose to focus either on the 14 - 18 or the 19 - 30 age groups as their needs are so different. In my own experience with the District 5490 program, we've focused on high school sophomores and juniors, as we like delegates to have at least one full year following RYLA to apply their leadership skills within their local school and community environments. As one former delegate commented; *"I came home a different person. RYLA helped me to build the confidence I needed to take on new projects and activities involving leadership back home."*

The delegate selection process begins with recommendations from school counselors, Interact clubs or direct inquiries from interested students. Each district club typically sponsors at least one delegate, and the clubs determine their own final selection process. In addition, all current inbound Youth Exchange students residing in the district automatically attend RYLA and are integral to the program.

The RYLA weekend begins on a Friday night after delegates have traveled by bus from around the district. All delegates meet and become part of a team for the weekend and each team will include at least one Youth Exchange student and team names are derived from the home country of each team's Youth Exchange student. In recent years as we've had teams with more than one Youth Exchange member so creative team names such as "Gerpan" (Germany and Japan) have evolved. Twelve teams consisting of approximately 10 delegates are created. In addition each team has two Rotarian "Facilitators" and a "Junior Counselor" who is a prior year delegate selected to return and play a unique role assisting the facilitators with various team activities.



Friday evening activities include introductory talks, icebreaking exercises and a keynote speaker with a strong motivating story. Our own Rotary eClub Southwest USA member Jerry Traylor has been a keynote speaker as well as providing a follow up program presentation to each team later in the weekend.

The heart of the RYLA program occurs on Saturday and Sunday when each team will cycle through a variety of programs with leadership themes and challenges threaded through the days' varied activities.

1) **Low and High Ropes** : These "ropes" activities derive their names because incidentally ropes are sometimes used in the course of performing various challenge and learning tasks. Typical "Low ropes" challenges involve teamwork, goal setting, and group problem solving. These challenges are also excellent at bringing teams together, and have proved to be so beneficial that we now have all teams start Saturday morning activities with a few initial fun team building activities that we call "Ropes Bonding." "High Ropes" are activities which challenge individual delegates to push themselves out of their comfort zones, overcome fears and exceed self expectations.

2) **Communication and Leadership**: With the assistance of local Toastmasters clubs, delegates are introduced to and practice basic public speaking skills which will be essential as they take on future leadership roles.

3) **Personal and Group Relationships**:

In his day program Jerry Traylor expands on his story, talks about what has driven him to reject "disability" with a vengeance, and urges delegates to do the same as they choose their road in life.†



Additional programs help delegates explore their own leadership and problem solving styles.

4) **Interact and Youth Exchange**: Delegates learn new ideas about Interact which leads to strengthening of existing Interact clubs and often leads to the formation of new clubs. Youth Exchange students share their viewpoints and experiences as other delegates consider the possibilities of going on a future outbound exchange.

5) **Bafa Bafa**: This experience is one of my favorites and I've been co-presenting the program the past few years. In this activity the delegates play a cross cultural awareness training game. Originally developed by the U.S. Navy to educate officers who were going to be stationed overseas, we play an abbreviated version in which two teams learn to act as members of two very different "cultures." As the game progresses the teams exchange visitors and try to figure out the other "strange" culture. The debriefing session is a true eye opener to the delegates and the perspective of the Youth Exchange students is a great addition as they share their actual experiences of discovering a new

culture. One former delegate reflected, *"RYLA and Bafa Bafa helped me understand that even though we live in different places, we are all the same."*



In addition to the above noted programs, teams have time to work together typically to create a team presentation of a fun skit, as well as ideas to solve an important community issue they have identified. These presentations become part of Saturday and Sunday night activities which will also include an additional keynote motivational speaker and more fun time for dance and campfire activities.

The weekend concludes Monday morning with final team presentations and closing activities that pull together the RYLA weekend. Delegates and Rotarians alike share experiences with new "Rylarian" friends. Finally closing ceremonies, with a few bittersweet tears shed, leave everyone energized and looking to the future as buses leave for home. In the words of a former delegate *"I am more trusting and better in front of people when I'm talking. I had such a blast and I was encouraged to go for my dream more in 3 days than I ever have."* Another delegate wrote, *"Before (RYLA) I was lost † Nothing nor no one mattered. † I'm changed, and now I'm a leader. † I chose my road!"*



RYLA offers a service opportunity for Rotarians who want to help shape the lives of future generations by taking an active role in the development of young leaders. The proud mother of a former delegate wrote us after her daughter returned from the RYLA weekend; *"What you have given me is a daughter who is growing into a young lady with aspirations of becoming someone special, not just*

dreaming about it, but realizing she can, and will someday, somehow make a difference." That's what RYLA is all about.