

# Rotary



The Rotary Club of Wilmington  
Post Office Box 1194  
Wilmington, NC 28402

## Diversity of Membership: Wilmington Rotary is no Longer an ‘Old Boys’ Club

By Mimi Cunningham

To paraphrase an old advertising slogan, Rotary in 2015 is not your father’s Rotary club—nor your grandfather’s or great-grandfather’s. The Wilmington club’s current diversity of race, sex, age and profession is a far cry from the stereotypical “old boy’s club” image.

Sweeping changes reshaped Rotary International in the late 20th Century. The first forcefully banned racial discrimination, in reaction to a large U.S. club’s explicit refusal to accept African-American members as late as 1982. The next broadened the range of occupations in clubs that previously had rigidly limited applicants by profession.

The final, and undoubtedly most difficult, was Rotary’s belated decision to admit women to full membership after years of heated debate inside and outside the movement.

### Gender

From its earliest days, women were part of Rotary’s story. In 1911, the Minneapolis Women’s Rotary Club was established. A year later, the Women’s Rotary Club of Duluth, Minn. asked the Rotary Convention, meeting in that city, for support in forming other women’s Rotary clubs. They didn’t get it. Soon women’s clubs were officially disapproved.

Both official and informal auxiliaries, made up of Rotarians’ wives, formed in the 1920s: “Rotary Ann” was the American term; “Inner Wheel” was a British organization. By any name, even when denied membership, women played important roles in carrying out Rotary’s mission.

The tone of discussions about allowing women to become Rotarians says a lot about prevailing attitudes. A 1934 study by the University of Chicago called the admission of women to Rotary “unthinkable” because “Rotarians are family men whose wives are home-makers and mothers.”

A common argument, all the way up to 1987, was that men had joined a men’s club and that any group should have the right to pick its own members. The male-only side became increasingly defensive as the women’s rights movement picked up steam in the 1970’s.

In 1977, the Rotary Club of Duarte, Calif., admitted three women, defying its standard-issue constitution. The club refused to remove the women and Rotary International revoked its charter. The Duarte club and the three women sued, claiming unlawful discrimination based on gender.

Finally, in 1987, a unanimous Supreme Court ruled against Rotary, saying it couldn't revoke a club's charter for admitting women. The RI board decreed that women must be admitted, but only in the United States. It also announced a vote would be taken in 1989 on the international constitution. Starting in 1964, Rotary's Council on Legislation had considered that change six times, and rejected it six times, even after RI's board and president supported admitting women. The Supreme Court forced the issue for them.

The Council finally deleted the word "male" from RI's constitution in 1989. The vote was 328 to 117.

Here in Wilmington, after 74 male-only years, the Wilmington Rotary Club had to wrestle with this change.

Darryl Bruestle, Wilmington's chief of police, was club president when the Supreme Court made its ruling. "Several old-timers weren't happy with it, and a couple may have dropped out over having women come in."

The first mention of a possible female member came in September 1987 when the board considered an honorary membership for Nancy Marks, a former Rotary scholar and wife of long-time Rotarian Ham Marks. The board took no action, but finally made her an honorary member in 1991.

During the uncertainty between the Supreme Court ruling and RI's 1989 rule change, the club debated the matter.

Rotarian Gleason Allen, a lawyer, reported to the board in November 1987. He cited a state attorney general's opinion, relying on a narrow point of law, that said "the ruling of the Supreme Court would not be applicable in this state." Allen concluded, "Our local board would have authority for whichever position it chose to take." A motion to wait for RI's decision failed by 7 to 3.

Royce Angel and Charlie Scruggs moved to amend the club by-laws "to give fair and equal consideration to all candidates to membership without regard to gender but otherwise to observe all other rules of membership." This passed unanimously and was made public on December 1, 1987.

Even so, the club's membership wasn't ready to admit women. The board called a special meeting in February 1988 to hear and discuss any issues that were bothering Rotarians.

President Jim Hundley made it clear that the vote to admit women would not be up for debate. No minutes were taken at that two-hour meeting, which 25 members attended.

Later that year, the club's board considered two female applicants and approved one of them. Objections to the other included rumors that the applicant was planning to seek admission to another all-male institution, the Cape Fear Club.

One member argued, "The induction of this lady would end an honorable, successful, respected tradition of almost 75 years standing. If women are introduced into the Club, the character and quality of the fellowship will change. It is quite apparent that there is no groundswell of demand for ladies' membership."

Another preferred that the club "remain an organization of civic minded businessmen. A large number of our members would resent women members to the extent it would weaken our fellowship and service activities significantly." Two members referenced the Four-Way Test in their objections, one writing that offering membership to the applicant "would definitely not build good will and better friendship and would NOT be beneficial to all concerned."

The board chose to defer any decisions on female applicants until Rotary International made its decision in 1989.

Joe Augustine, president in 1988-89, said the board was pretty much unanimous in wanting to admit women, and nearly all the members agreed, too. "About a dozen guys resented the change," he said, but none quit that he knew of.

The board finally voted on November 28, 1989, accepting Fran Young and Eloise Thomas as members. They were inducted on January 9, 1990. Several more women joined that year: Donna Shiro, Connie Tyndall and Hannah Gage. I was inducted in November 1990, and became the first female president in 1994. Since then the club has had five more female presidents.

Augustine, former executive VP of the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, has been in the club since 1979. He believes women "came in with a different point of view, fresh outlook, with enthusiasm," and participated more.

Stacy Ankrum, a banker, became a member in January 2006 at the age of 25. She became the club's sixth female president in 2011. As of January 1, 2015, 41 of the club's 203 members are female, or 20 percent. Ankrum echoed Augustine's observation that women are more active members than men. "Women's participation in activities is in the 90 percent range. It's much lower for men, even though women make up a smaller percentage of the club."

Ankrum has led efforts to improve the club's fund raising. "When I was president-elect, there was no real fund raising to speak of," she said. Since 1999, club members have donated and distributed \$910,000 for local and international charitable projects as of October, 2013, including \$365,000 to the international Rotary Foundation.

As of June, 2014, women were about 20 percent of the world's more than 1.2 million Rotarians. In the United States, that ratio is more than 27 percent. Of Rotary's 532 district governors nearly 18 percent are female. Eighty-three percent of all Rotary clubs have female members.

## Race

As a worldwide organization, since 1922 Rotary International has required all new clubs to adopt the standard club constitution, which has no restrictions concerning race.

A constitution and bylaws dated 1932 are the earliest in The Wilmington Rotary Club's archives. Despite the pervasive and official racial segregation of the time, these documents say only that membership is open to "adult male persons of good character and good business or professional reputation." Race is never mentioned. Nevertheless, the Wilmington club remained all-white until the 1980s.

The race issue surfaced nationally in 1982 when the editor of *The Birmingham Post-Herald* proposed changing his Rotary club's explicitly whites-only charter. In a secret vote, the Birmingham club voted 120-90 to continue the ban. The editor resigned in protest.

When the news got out, RI acted promptly, declaring that "racial discrimination has no place in Rotary" and banning "any club from limiting membership in the club on the basis of race, color, creed or national origin." The Birmingham club, threatened with having its charter revoked, agreed by voice vote of 200 to 1 to permit non-white members.

The Wilmington club's archives don't show much conversation about racial diversity until 1987, when arguments over women were dominating board meetings. That year, Father Thomas Hadden, pastor of St. Mary Catholic Church, became the club's first African-American member.

Five years passed before the next African-American joined. Linda Pearce, CEO of Elderhaus Adult Day Services, was inducted in 1992. A graduate of Williston High School, Pearce had moved back to Wilmington 12 years earlier after working at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

"I had no desire or inclination to join Rotary," Pearce remembered. "Billy Sutton convinced me to do it." Sutton was a Wilmington businessman, civic leader and politician, and a Rotarian from 1953 until 2014. "He told me the club already had let women in, and it needed to take the next step and bring in a black woman. I knew him from the political trail and loved him. He was way ahead of his time in his thought processes, very liberal."

Pearce was not exactly welcomed with open arms. "Billy wasn't coming to Rotary right then, and at first nobody sat at the table with me. I knew Russ LaBelle from United Way, and it seems like he came over and sat with me. Billy told me he lost some friends because he brought me into Rotary, but that was OK because it was the right thing to do and the right time."

In 2015, the club has nine African-American members.

Two years ago, in 2013, Pearce raised objections to the club's holding events at a facility that has never had any African-Americans members. This club's black members chose not to participate in one of those events, an annual fund-raiser.

Pearce called into question the club's commitment to the Four-Way Test Rotarians recite every week. "If we are to cite the Four-Way Test and hold it as gospel," she asked, should the club be doing business with a place where some of its members feel unwelcome?

In response, the board formed an eight-member Four-Way Test Committee including Pearce and three other African-American Rotarians. The committee recommended, and the board adopted, a policy explicitly applying the Four-Way Test as a guide to how the club conducts its business.

The policy applies to the club's own operations, and sets a standard of inclusion for all the vendors the club does business with.

Because of such initiatives as the Four-Way Test policy and the Legacy Project at Williston Middle School, Pearce commented, "Our club had a reputation for being a good ol' boys club; now it has a reputation as being the most progressive Rotary club in town."

Rev. Wayne Johnson, pastor of St. Stephen African Methodist Episcopal Church, joined the club in 2012, coming to Wilmington from Stuttgart, Ark., where he had been president-elect of the Stuttgart Rotary Club. "I wanted to continue my Rotary journey" in Wilmington, he said.

Johnson, universally known as "Pastor Wayne," thinks the club will one day select an African-American president.

As a relatively new observer of the club, Johnson says he sees a "wonderful mix of younger, middle-aged, experienced members."

## **Classification**

Paul Harris's concept of one club member per profession or business was original in 1905, and set Rotary apart from other organizations. But it could not stand the test of time or the threat of declining membership. This club, like others, frequently found itself turning away prospective members because of classification rules.

RI was slow to help clubs deal with this problem, which involved increasingly complex rules in the 1980s and 1990s.

Finally, in 2001, RI relaxed its old, restrictive rules, so clubs were longer limited to one member per occupation.

Coleman Burgess III, a Rotarian since 1986, heads the classification committee—a much easier job after the rules changed. "It has strengthened our club," he said, "allowing us to bring in more members. . . . Being less restrictive has helped build club membership and bring in younger people."

Formerly, Rotarians were their company's senior executives. "Many times people not in the top position have more time and ability to provide service and be more involved in club service and projects," Burgess observed. The new rules have brought in more members serving in

different roles. “The president or CEO has an entirely different perspective than a rank and file worker, whether helping serve or becoming involved in projects. The new mix is much better.”

## **Age**

This formerly “old men’s” club has changed by bringing in younger people. When he became a member in 2003, President-elect John Meyer recalls, then-President Don Britt liked to joke that the club’s average age was “deceased.” Britt noted that during his year as president, “I was fortunate to bring in 41 new members. But I will always remember taking in a 32-year-old member and an 80-year-old member on the same day and thinking that wasn’t much help in reducing the average.”

As of January 1, 2015, the average age of the club was 57 after declining steadily in recent years. Subtracting senior “rule of 85” members, those on “active” status average 53.

Stacy Ankrum, who was the club’s youngest president at 30, started a regular after-work gathering for Rotarians. “I wanted to do more social things. When you’re younger, it’s a good way to network. That’s why Rotary started. Networking is a product of being in the club.”

The club currently has 17 members under age 39. That more youthful membership, Ankrum said, “creates new ideas, leads to new people to get to know, brings in new industries and businesses such as in insurance and construction. Instead of just resting, this age group wants to give back to the community.” She acknowledged, however, that many of the veteran “rule of 85” members, having done their part for many years, are entitled to take a break.

Since she joined in 2006, Ankrum said, she thinks the membership has become more active, with half of those on the rolls playing a significant part in the club’s work.

*Mimi Cunningham, a Rotarian since 1990, was the first woman to be the Wilmington club’s president, in 1994-95. This was written for the club’s centennial history book, published in April 2015.*