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An unlikely Rotarian looks at the club on its 100th



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I never would have joined Rotary Club. I knew the group wasn't for me. In my mind, if I ever bothered to envision Rotary, especially Rotary in Utah, I saw it clearly: old men of one race, one religion, one political party, with one interest - business.

While I knew Rotary wasn't for me, I also knew they did good work of some sort. When I wanted to help get the word out about a non-profit where I worked, I kept saying, "Someone should join Rotary so all those business guys know we're here." As non-profit people know, if you say it twice, it becomes part of your job.

So it was that I joined the Salt Lake Rotary Club. I did it for the good of my non-profit.

My first official function was an orientation meeting at the Alta Club. That's where I committed my first faux pas. Someone gave a history of

Rotary, mentioning that it was solely a men's organization until they began accepting women - and this is where I accidentally gasped quite loudly - in 1989. I don't know what year would have kept me silent. 1960? 1970? I wasn't prepared for 1989, not even sitting there in the Alta Club.

My status as a Rotarian brings great amusement to my friends. No one can believe I joined. They ask me how I like being a ROMEO (Really Old Men Eating Out). They ask me when I'm going to go into banking. I don't mind their teasing.

I have learned the unexpected - Rotary is pretty cool. It's a global network of community volunteers - Service Above Self is the motto - made up of kind-hearted people from business and beyond: physicians, folks from non-profits, educators and retired people. What Rotarians do, besides eating lunch, which apparently is key, is care for the world and its people. They're committed to international peace, public health and education.

Rotary has 1.2 million members in 168 countries. They build wells in Mali, start chicken farms in Mexico and support micro-credit programs around the globe. It's like the Peace Corps for grown-ups.

This year is Rotary's 100th anniversary. For the centennial,

Rotarians hoped to be able to announce the worldwide eradication of polio. It's still a ways off, but when it comes, Rotary can take credit for undertaking the largest public-sector global health initiative the world has ever seen. Due in large part to Rotary, new polio cases have been reduced by 99 percent in the past 17 years.

Rotarians in 40 clubs around Utah award scholarships, build parks and playgrounds, hold clothing drives, buy dictionaries for kids and slip a little cash to people who have fallen on hard times. They provide meals at the shelter, pick up trash on the highway, build and paint and clean and donate and encourage and cheer.

While I feel at home with Rotary's ideals, the day-to-day fit isn't always perfect. We women of the club are vastly outnumbered, about five to one. We occasionally are invited to bring our wives to functions.

In addition, Rotarians always call each other by their given names. I'm not used to addressing doctors, professors, religious leaders and the like, some a good quarter-century older than I, by their first names.

There's an invocation at each meeting and if I've heard 150 "non-denominational" prayers since I joined, I think it would be fair to characterize about 75 of them as straight out of the LDS

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playbook. But on the other hand, the other 75 times they weren't, and maybe then some folks were taken outside their usual faith paradigm. And that's a good thing. For this club that's about international friendship and understanding, the weekly saying of grace should be a diverse experience. (Say that twice and you're on the invocation committee.)

My club is more diverse than I anticipated. True, we're an alarmingly white, male group, but not exclusively or by design (anymore). We have members from dozens of religions and no religion. Some of us are gay or lesbian, some are bishops of LDS wards or Catholic dioceses, some run companies that others lobby against. Some of us would be natural enemies in the wild. Several members of my club recently attended a protest against President Bush's policies, while an honorary member of our club called us nutcakes.

But what we all have in common is the desire to help. When we get together, it really doesn't matter what we might do in real life, it's just, did you bring a hammer, can you tutor a kid, will you write a check, or can you house some visitors from Turkey? As a club we reach across our differences to work together so we can serve the people of the world. Rotarians Open Many Eyes to Others.

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.