

Youth Exchange Programs are the most wonderful activities of Rotary International. All of you who devote so much energy to them are surely aware of that. Many past RI Presidents have also agreed with that assertion. Carl Wilhem Stenhammar said that if all 17 year-old youngsters participated in LTEP, there wouldn't be any more wars. John Kenny affirmed at the latest RI Convention in Montreal that YE is a success story. Today Ray is even doing better ...he is with us, proving his interest in YE. Thank you so much Ray. Your presence here is quite motivating.

And it is not only Rotarians who are aware of the importance of YE. The American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton encouraged the American people to make the choice to help showcase their values by building relationships with those from other countries. "When we dispel stereotypes and we open new avenues of dialogues across boundaries and borders, we enrich ourselves and the world " she said. (Her entire speech is presented on You Tube.)

Most of the time, when we mention youth exchange, we mean long term exchanges. LTEP requires an applicant with very special qualities. He or she must be totally motivated, psychologically strong, above-average enough to follow courses abroad in a foreign language and most importantly, his or her parents must be persuaded that this year is not a wasted one, not a gap year of Fiesta, but a year that will positively impact their children 's lives.

So, let's be realistic, for various reasons, not all youngsters can participate in LTEP. This doesn't mean that RI cannot do anything for those who do not meet all the requirements or do not wish to leave home for so long. Other programs can better suit them and allow them also to have a fruitful and positive exchange experience. The Short Term Exchange Program is one of them. Its impact on the students' lives is different but also of great importance.

There are several programs that do not require youngsters to spend a whole year far from home.

FAMILY TO FAMILY EXCHANGES

The exchangee spends a certain amount of weeks in a foreign country and hosts his partner for the same length of time. It is a good and safe way to discover the way of life of another country. Finding a host family is often a problem that prevents families from allowing their children to participate in other types of exchanges. In this case, finding a host family is not a problem at all.

HOLIDAY EXCHANGE PROGRAMS OR CAMPS

A district invites about 20 young people from various countries - usually situated in the EEMA zone -for about two to four weeks. All these young people learn to know each other, communicate in a common language, usually English, and learn to become tolerant of each other. Provided they are still young enough, this first experience may serve as an incentive for future participation in longer exchanges.

NEW GENERATION EXCHANGES

Short term exchange programs for young people have been around for years - catering to individuals and groups -but some age brackets have not been covered, which is why NGE has been introduced. It is often open to young people between the ages of 20 and 25. NGE usually incorporates vocational training or education during the weekdays.

I'd like to focus now on a very popular STEP : the family to family exchange. Officially, STEP are open to students from 15 to 19. But, as there are no formal school activities involved, it doesn't really matter if the students are a bit older provided we can find a suitable partner. Like in LTEP, the exchangees should possess qualities such as flexibility and a willingness to try new things. These qualities will enable them to fully experience life in another country as well as act as excellent cultural ambassadors by sharing perspectives from their own countries.

Those candidates' parents are generally more accepting of the exchange idea as their children will be gone for only a few short weeks, and also because of the shorter time period they are more willing to host an exchangee themselves. Because the program is completely administered by Rotary club members, the expenses are kept low, and the destinations are usually closer which means less expensive flights. Some parents also encourage their sons and daughters to participate in STEP because, although language is only a by-product, it allows their children to potentially improve their knowledge of a foreign language.

YEOs should consider the many advantages of STEP. The program requires less work on the part of the YEO than LTEP because the application form is shorter and not as intricate. No school is involved. And because of the short time period, the potential for psychological problems and homesickness is greatly reduced. At the same time, YEOs must always strive to create and maintain a safe environment for all youth who participate in Rotary activities. All the clubs and districts involved must be certified.

Many Rotary club members are also not well informed about STEP. They do not pay enough attention to it, especially if their children are adults and their grandchildren are still too young to participate in exchange programs. Most of the time, after they meet the young foreigner or hear the report given by the student their club has sponsored, they wish they did know more about youth exchange so that they can encourage a child they know to participate in such a wonderful experience.

Why are STEP so important? First of all because they give youngsters who do not wish to or can't spend a whole year abroad a chance to experience the magic of the exchange. Secondly, because they demonstrate the profound impact that RI is making in the world in a very personal, community-based way. People of the community in which the exchange takes place meet the young foreigner, someone who is new and different. They learn a little about the culture that young person comes from. Then they also hear what the returning exchangee experienced during his or her stay abroad. The community

members are interested in learning about the youngster's adventures and at the same time, they are learning about the Rotary. Sometimes it is their first introduction to the Rotary. Additionally, the schoolmates of that student-exchange are benefiting indirectly from the exchange. They will meet the exchangee, and spend time with him or her. This friendship could potentially encourage them to want to have their own exchange experience.

Host clubs should encourage this community participation, and increase their community exposure by making sure articles about student-exchange are published in local newspapers and by emphasizing to prospective exchange candidates that Rotarians have not created a "self-service" exchange program. ... The programs are open to all of the children in the community.

You got some information about STEP and hopefully you will agree with me that we should promote the program much more. As I often say, youth exchanges are magic. We all do a wonderful job to make exchanges successful and magical and to make young people's dreams become reality butlet's roll up our sleeves ...we can still do better !