

Garry Gunnell - my Rotary journey

Joined Rotary in January 1981 so soon to clock up 40 years and how time passes. I joined at the age of 27 which was not common but encourage by my work who thought that it could assist being part of a community organisation. I soon realised that there was more to Rotary then just work connections and the service opportunities both on a local and international front was the benefit.

As part of a club that was continually active in the local community, I soon became involved in a number of areas over the years. One of the first was being put on the committee which run the clubs Axedale Youth Camp. Great fellowship with the many working bees followed as there was always worked to be done. The camp was established after WW2 to provide a facility for youth who had lost fathers in the war and later for school camps, community groups, family reunions, etc. It became too big a commitment for the club as especially a major upgrade was required for it to continue. With the camp now a District project, I am still out at working bees as part of the team on the District Camp Getaway committee. A special focus in the upgrade was to cater for patrons with special needs and together with the regular groups attending it is still going strong.



I guess being one wanting to be involved I have held most positions in the club and was President in 1999/2000. Have attended two Rotary International Conventions.

Apart from the various club activity involvements over the years my special focus has been with International projects and Student Exchange. Working overseas with Rotary came about when we had a guest speaker from Melbourne South Rotary talk about their club project in PNG. They were also looking for some extra volunteers to join them so Hugh Wheeler and myself became the first

club members as volunteers to work in a remote area of PNG. A fabulous experience and the start of many such volunteer trips working and living in village locations.

In 1993 the call went out seeking teams to help in the reconstruction process in Western Samoa after two devastating cyclones hit a short time apart. I was soon able to convince 12 people from Bendigo Rotary and surrounding clubs to come on board. We formed two teams and travelled out into the Pacific a small dot on the map. Fortunately, Bill Gray a Bendigo Rotary member had business dealings in the Pacific, had been to Samoa and was coming along so was able to give us a good briefing on what to expect.



We were able to meet with members from the local Rotary Club who were helping get teams to the village location. These friendships remain to this day and the clubs work has continued ever since in Samoa. I am fast approaching trip number 37 which would have been about now if Covid19 had not put a stop to overseas travel. Over the years we have worked in many villages around the islands of Samoa. Projects such as building Cyclone shelters, construction of water tanks, environmental toilet systems, water supplies, have all been on the list. More recently work in upgrading library facilities to village primary schools and construction of a computer training centre have been undertaken. Our work has been in village primary schools as they are the responsibility of the village community to maintain so are extremely limited in what they can do. We always have a group of locals working with us so they can take ownership of the project after we leave.

The biggest project I was involved with in Samoa was being asked by the Australian High commissioner if Rotary could help them. It was evident that in the construction of village primary schools the roofing was not strong enough to withstand a future cyclone and the need for them to be strengthened. 80 primary schools were targeted, and they appointed a manager to coordinate the project in Samoa.



Australian funding was provided for all the materials and some local work teams were trained. The time frame to complete was 18 months which was well out of reach of his local workers to complete. I said I could help as it was an ideal project for a team to undertake as each school with a team of 4-6 and some locals could complete in 2 weeks. We only had to fund our flights as all materials were provided with food and accommodation provided in the village. I was a little taken back when told that they wanted Rotary to take on 40 of the schools so I put a call out across Australia via my RAWCS contacts. I soon had those 40 teams which then required coordination of dates, travel arrangements and pre-briefing over the 18-month period.



Student Exchange has also been a highlight with Joy and me hosting 8-10 students over the years. An experience I would recommend to anyone to be a part of. We now have so many friends overseas and, on many occasions have caught up with past students and their families. A wedding in Hungary was special and I believe a few more weddings to attend will soon be on the agenda.



Outside of club activities I have been involved with District and currently on the District Youth Exchange Committee plus Camp Getaway Committee. Over the years have been and still am active with RAWCS. A past District committee member and chair. Southern Region RAWCS treasurer and Chair. Also, a number of years on National RAWCS Board as treasurer. As part of a team under PDG Lou Johnson from Launceston, we enabled RAWCS to move from only able to operate with overseas projects to where it is today which can also undertake projects in Australia. With the establishment by RAWCS of the Rotary Australia Benevolent Society this Fund is now doing great work following disasters like bushfires and droughts in Australia plus much more.

