

Are Service Clubs still Relevant?

Kiwanis International Convention • Orlando, Florida

Thank you, Amanda, for that kind introduction. It is an honor to be with you today, almost 40 years since I served as president of Circle K International. I am sure that Kiwanis, like everything else in society, has changed a great deal since then, but I am equally sure that the organization has retained its commitment to service, especially to young people.

I remember with fondness the old national office at 101 East Erie Street, and how many winter mornings a young man from the South braved the cold and wind of Chicago to spend a couple of days a month there. (Incidentally, one of my sons and his wife live in Chicago now, so I am back there on occasion.) I am also in Indianapolis frequently in my role as chair of the executive committee of the NCAA and as a member of the financial council for the Christian Church Disciples of Christ.

My time in Chicago was the first of many cultural experiences that my time in Circle K afforded me.

In addition to fulfilling my duties as president, there was a change in the executive director's office during my tenure, and for four or five months I was essentially both executive director and president.

I am a life Kiwanian and a life Rotarian, and I have stayed in close contact with the service club movement in this country. I understand the challenges and opportunities facing both local clubs and the national and international offices of the service clubs.

The service club movement in this country began in 1905 in Chicago when Paul Harris, an attorney, invited three friends to meet in an effort to recreate the spirit he had enjoyed growing up in a small town. The meetings rotated among their places of business, and Rotary was born.

But the desire for a network of friends and business relationships built around a commitment to service was strong, and soon other such clubs were formed. The first Kiwanis Club, as you probably know, met in Detroit in 1915. Civitan was begun in 1917 in Birmingham; the Lions Club was started in Chicago the same year. The Optimists first met in 1911 in Buffalo. (How they were optimistic in Buffalo, I have no idea . . .)

Since then, the clubs have recruited members committed to service and have had an immeasurable impact on the quality of life for

people in need around the world. The Lions have committed to ridding the world of blindness. Rotarians have almost eradicated polio from the globe.

And we Kiwanians have focused on literacy and the health of infants, particularly iodine deficiency, as well as our tradition of service to young people.

But I find myself today equally concerned and optimistic about the future of service clubs.

A *USA Today* story from last fall headlined "Not your granddad's service club" addressed the membership drain with which service clubs are struggling. Kiwanis membership peaked in 1992; Lions in 1978; and Rotary in 1993.

The truth is simply that the next generation of civic leaders leads a different, more hectic lifestyle than in the past, and if service clubs want to attract them, service clubs will have to appeal to them in ways they have not done before. I will say more about that later.

Being president of Circle K was a wonderful experience.

Along with two years as an international trustee, it allowed me to crisscross Canada and the United States and to make my first around-the-world trip, including a good bit of time with leading U.S. officials in war-torn Viet Nam.

Because of this office, I was one of the people appointed by President Nixon to conduct an outside citizen's response to the war. (While polite, the Administration was not particularly taken with what I and the president of the national Jaycees reported.)

My time in Circle K was amazing. I made lifelong friends with whom I remain in contact, especially eight or 10 other international presidents. Interestingly, one of them, Ralph Kalish, has a son who is a student at UGA.

Reg Meridew, who was executive director of Kiwanis, and the members of the board described the relationship we enjoyed as "excellent." I was from a relatively small southern town, having grown up in South Georgia and graduated from high school in Chattanooga; I was attending a religiously-affiliated school in Nashville; and my

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hair was not unreasonably long. Yet there was a still a huge gulf between the Circle K board, which I represented, and the Kiwanis board.

Despite the strong personal relationship, there was almost nothing – beyond a commitment to service – on which the two boards agreed.

We had different opinions about the war. We had different opinions about the national leadership. We had strongly different opinions about the role of women in society. Indeed the greatest heartburn I created for Kiwanis was the appointment of a committee to study the feasibility of admitting women to Circle K, which, of course, was in violation of the bylaws at that time.

I believe Circle K was the first of the three Kiwanis groups to admit women, a move now seen as completely sensible.

Along with threats of college lawsuits in the Northeast, Circle K's decision ultimately led to the inclusion of women in Kiwanis.

Ironically, at a speech I gave earlier this year at the Downtown Atlanta Kiwanis Club, I was introduced by my daughter-in-law and the mother of my first grandchild. She is a member of that club and a young and successful medical malpractice attorney.

Never did I dream that I might have played a role in something that would ultimately impact my own family.

At no time would I suggest that Kiwanians have been uncommitted to the concept of service. But I would suggest, and rather emphatically, that their initial rejection of the coming changes in cultural norms and mores – a rejection which ultimately impacted Kiwanis in serious and lasting ways – was self-absorbed if not Pollyannish.

I want to thank Rob Parker for the invitation to speak to you today. I have spoken at a Circle K convention and scores of local Kiwanis clubs over the years, but this is the first time in 40 years that I have been invited to speak to this group, or that anyone has asked about its youth programs.

I believe I can safely say that I have played a more significant role in higher education than anyone who has served as international president of any of the groups.

Ironically, isn't it, coming from a group that touts service to young people as its primary objective? And since I now have the "ask" and the "opportunity" . . .

In the spirit of both openness and candor, and out of a deep affection for this organization and a concern for the national organization of Kiwanis and service clubs as a whole, I am going to be bold enough to make a few suggestions.

First, take some time to get to know today's young people. Really know them. I doubt that you will, and I know that you should not, be threatened by them.

They are different from me at that age, and different from most of you at that age as well. But young people have always differed from the preceding generations.

But if you take the time to get to know them, as I am privileged to do on a daily basis with some of the brightest young people in this country, you will come to have the same confidence in the future that I have. They are focused, they are tenacious, they are capable.

The future of this country is as bright as ever because of them.

But to know them, you must understand how different their life experience has been from ours. Each year, Beloit College releases a fact sheet on the freshman class; I recommend that you read the entire list on the Beloit website. But here is a sample, for context, of the way last year's freshman class saw the world:

- There has never been a Berlin Wall.
- They have never "rolled down" a car window.
- Nelson Mandela has always been free.
- Pete Rose has never played baseball.
- They have never seen an Eastern Airlines plane in the air.
- Wal-Mart has always been a larger retailer than Sears.
- Stadiums and sporting events have always had corporate names.
- Being a latchkey kid has never been a big deal.
- Tiananmen Square is just another Olympics venue.

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- The space program only gets their attention in a disaster.
- They never saw Johnny Carson live on television.
- The Worldwide Web has been available to them all of their lives.
- And thanks to Facebook and MySpace, they write their autobiographies in real time.

Clearly, these are young people with different experiences, different lifestyles and a different world view than many of us. But they are no less focused, no less patriotic and no less committed to service than we are.

Don't turn the differences into obstacles to working together for common goals. Simply spend the time to get to know them.

Second, rededicate the organization to the youth programs. The top of the Kiwanis website reads "Serving the Children of the World."

But one of the things missing at many Kiwanis meetings today is any sense of energy and vitality. Trust me, no group brings those qualities to a gathering like young people.

Don't serve them in the abstract; serve them face to face. The young people in your community need you – they need your friendship, they need your mentoring, they need your experience, they need your time.

They will benefit from your help and guidance, but I firmly believe that the reciprocal benefit to you will be even greater.

A quick web search for Circle K clubs shows thousands of young people involved in service at the most basic level – face to face, hands-on, local and meaningful. They are preparing and delivering meals for homebound AIDS patients. They are preparing and serving a Thanksgiving feast for homeless shelter residents. They are mentoring their troubled peers at a juvenile detention center. They are collecting used furniture, clothing and other items that are discarded at the end of the school year and donating them to those in need.

They volunteer at a home for neglected and abused children, playing games, doing crafts and simply

spending time with children whom others have discarded.

They work at a local animal shelter, cleaning cages, feeding animals, taking them outside for walks and play. They visit convalescent homes.

I could go on and on, but I hope you see that the next potential generation of Kiwanis leaders gets it – they are fully committed to the ideal of service, and they are doing very good work.

Don't let their differences cloud your judgment of their commitment.

Third, re-think the normal tedium of your meetings. With all due respect, singing "Old Susannah" and having announcements from eight different people while time for the program withers away simply will not work in the 21st century.

The people you want in your clubs have multiple demands on their time, and they make value judgments about how they use that time. Your club is in competition for that time, and other entities are playing hard. Are you prepared to play hard, too?

Most announcements can be handled in the newsletter or bulletin, by e-mail or on your club website.

Focus on the strength of your programs; the program chair may be the most important person in your club, and must be a person of substance who is willing to spend the time necessary to make your meetings worth people's time – especially for business people. Their time is too precious to be wasted – yes, wasted – on tedium.

I cannot prove this, but most clubs that fail do so for one of two reasons: First, when new people come to a meeting, they don't see a broad representation of the society in which they live, work and play.

Second, with the exception of a few meetings a year, the programs can bore a thinking person to death.

Take a serious and critical look at how you conduct your meetings. If you were not a member and not already committed to the organization, would you come back?

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Finally, to be relevant today, a club must be willing to accept as normal some controversy, with full exposure to a broad range of issues, especially local issues.

A club that is not hearing regularly from mayors, commissioners, zoning and planning boards, economic development officials, business leaders, top academic officials, representatives of think tanks and other people who are operating on the cutting edge will soon become stagnant.

Who are the people who are doing important – and sometimes controversial -- work in your communities? Identify them and invite them to speak to your clubs.

To review: Get to know today's young people. Rededicate yourselves to the youth programs. Re-think your meeting protocol. Make yourselves relevant to the kind of people you want to have join your club.

To put it bluntly, you can't just be driving Buicks in a Toyota/Honda/BMW world.

Let me close by saying that I visit a lot of service clubs each year and I see many of them that are beginning to right the ship. The suggestions I have made today are based in part on observations I have made at some of those clubs. But more importantly, they are made out of lifelong commitment to and affection for the service club movement.

While familial and business interests are by no means inappropriate motivations for joining a club, I believe that most of you are here for the same reason I am: To offer service to people and communities in ways that benefit others and not ourselves.

It is great if business relationships develop, connections strengthen and your club membership puts you in touch with other community leaders, but service has to remain the core of what you do.

Sometimes we become a little complacent with the way things have always been done to the detriment of everyone – the members of the club and those we have pledged to serve. The opportunity to rearrange the “mental furniture” is good for all.

I know there is much good work being done by Kiwanis around the world; I also know that there are opportunities to do more, both locally and remotely.

I have read about the Smart Start program to eliminate iodine deficiency in Third World countries, primarily. I fully support the read Around the World program and commend the public/private partnerships that facilitate that work.

And the Priority One program focusing on the health of young children in your communities is the kind of program on which you can build relationships with young people. Trust me, today's college students want to help children as much, if not more, than you do, and they will devote hours and hours of their time to this program if you will simply invite them.

I believe that the plans being outlined by Rob Parker hold great hope for the future. I am especially impressed by the goal of 1 million members by the centennial year – that should motivate all of you to bring someone new into Kiwanis so that the club can have the kind of impact on them that it has had on us.

Great organizations embrace moments of change and transformation; they do not shy away from them. Service organizations in this country are facing just such a moment today. The truth is this: Kiwanis and Rotary and the others will be very different organizations in 10 years, regardless of what they do.

My charge to you, to Kiwanis, is to become better in that 10 years. Look seriously at everything you are doing and ask how it can be done better. That is how organizations get stronger – and I want Kiwanis to be around for my granddaughter.

Thank you again for the positive influence of Kiwanis on my life and the opportunity to be here today.