

Keynote Montreal 2010

Where to this pre-convention meeting?

Or Connecting the Threads of Quality Exchanges: What this Pre-convention Meeting Can Do For You
(Text to accompany Powerpoint)

Good morning. I am pleased to be here with you at our Youth Exchange Officers Meeting. Actually, we had the North American YE Network Conference here in February of 2009, so this is the second time in two years I have been to Montreal. Quebec is the birth province of my great great great grandfather, so this is a coming home again experience for me. *Je suis fiere d'etre Quebecois*. I would like to thank our Canadian hosts for their gracious hospitality. Would the Canadians in the audience please stand and be recognized?

You know for Americans, Canada is something of a romantic mystery. And to Canadians the United States is more of a harsh reality show. In fact Canadians are so familiar with American culture, because of our dominant position in politics, economics, pop culture and so many other public arenas, that they know quite well how they are different from us. Americans, on the other hand, are so poorly informed about Canada, that they think it is just a miniature United States, not much different from them. The author J Bartlett Brebner put it very well when he said, Americans are benevolently ignorant about Canada, while Canadians are malevolently well-informed about the United States.

Canadian Richard Starnes has said, "Canadians are generally indistinguishable from Americans and the surest way to tell the two apart is to make this observation to a Canadian. And as Canadian Dave Foley has said, "I'm Canadian. It's like an American without the gun."

American musician Weird Al Yankovick does parodies of popular songs. The musical group Green Day wrote a song called "American Idiot", which was critical of mindless acceptance of media interpretations of reality. Well, what did Weird Al do? He wrote "Canadian Idiot". I strongly suggest you check it out on Youtube. Here is one verse:

Well maple syrup and snow's what they export
They treat curling just like it's a real sport
They think their silly accent is so cute
Can't understand a thing they're talkin' about!

Canada for the most part is an example of the elder George Bush's "kinder gentler nation". While I may be continuing the mutual stereotyping of our two cultures, I can't resist this story. When I arrived in Montreal, I was greeted with all sorts of helpful assistance, when asking for directions, currency exchange rates, or for other information. Contrast this with the experience of a foreign guest in New York City, with only moderate English who, patiently, after asking several strangers, approached yet another New Yorker with the question "excuse me sir, do you know what time it is, or should I take the advice of everyone else I have asked and just go screw myself?"

So, on a more serious note, Why this speech? Connecting the Threads of Quality Exchanges: What this Pre-convention Meeting Can Do For You. Well, for the newcomers (and by the way, will the YEOs who are attending their very first YEO Pre-convention meeting please stand and be recognized?) For the

newcomers, since 2005, when the YE Committee was given its current configuration of six members serving three year terms, a number of things have happened, some in a coordinated fashion, some by chance, to cause this process of connecting the threads of quality exchanges.

First, the process of dealing with Certification was like a stone rolling down a hill and we were at the bottom of that hill. It caused all of us to pay attention to what we were doing and focus on things like policies and procedures, documentation and training. Actually, these are all very good things to be paying attention to. The effects of certification, however challenging it has been, continue to have a positive impact on the general quality of what we do.

Second, because there was this new format of the Youth Exchange Committee, they took advantage of the opportunity and met voluntarily, face to face, for the very first time ever, at the EEMA conference in Berlin. They made numerous recommendations to the RI Board and President, many of which were accepted and implemented. This is a process that has continued to this day with many face to face meetings of the committee. (We have already met the current YE Committee. Will the current and all past YE Committee members present also please stand and be recognized?) For about three years it was a process of learning how to communicate with the RI board and Secretariat, individual districts, and not least of all, with regional and national YE associations like NAYEN, EEMA, ABIJ, Australia, Japan, etc.

And third, the YE Committees for the past five years have maintained a steadfast commitment to Quality Improvement, Quality Assurance and Quality Management, including Strategic Planning. This meeting is a continuation of that process begun in 2005 at the centennial meeting in Chicago.

Topics of interest in some of those meetings in Chicago, Malmo/Copenhagen, Salt Lake City, Los Angeles and Birmingham (that's Birmingham, as in England as opposed to Birmingham, Alabama) have included an introduction to the concept of Risk Management, Crisis Management and Dealing with the Media, Certification, Understanding contemporary teenagers, understanding cultural differences at the yeo level, Basic orientations for new YEOs, (you know Youth Exchange A to Zed) reports from national and regional youth exchange associations, and the concept of small group discussion sessions.

Why do we choose topics like this? Perhaps it is obvious – to make Youth Exchange better. But that begs the question of why do we even bother to do Youth Exchange? After all it has always been a lot of work – and now it is becoming an extraordinarily huge amount of work. I think we all subscribe to the belief that Youth Exchange really does move us toward world peace, one exchange at a time. I think most of us subscribe to the belief that Youth Exchange changes people positively, forever. Not just the students, but the dozens, maybe even hundreds of people those students positively touch every year. Natural parents, host parents, siblings, friends, classmates, school teachers and yes, even Rotarians. These are good reasons to do Youth Exchange.

In fact, there is a growing body of research that confirms what we all believe, that people really do change for the better after an exchange. From the AFS research projects in the early 1980s to very recent studies we know that exchanges increase self-confidence, appreciation of home and family, critical thinking and creative problem-solving, to mention only a very few concepts. WE know that living in another culture causes us to look at the world and problems differently. WE know that being an exchange student requires looking for new ways to solve problems when our normal ways of doing it will not work in a different culture. But now research confirms this. Let me give you an example.

This slide shows a creative problem solving exercise. The problem is to find a way to safely attach the candle to the bulletin board and light it. Can you think of a way? Here is the most commonly arrived at solution. Use the thumb tack to attach the match box to the bulletin boards, light the candle, drip wax onto the bottom of the box, then attach it to the box. Former exchange students consistently solved this problem faster than people who had not gone on exchange.

But I think that there are many reasons people do youth exchange that are not necessarily shared by all of us, and some with which many of us might not always agree. Some months ago, on yeotalk (and for those of you who do not know about this tremendous electronic user group, please join the more than 500 yeos from around the world who communicate on a regular basis with this tool. The easiest way to join is to go to www.yeoresources.org, click on “yeotalk” and follow the instructions) Anyway, a few months ago, the question came, out of Canada, I think, asking if an outbound who was not a native of Canada wanted to go on exchange, was the sponsoring district obligated to disclose this information to the hosting district, in other words, would the hosting district be expecting a certain type of person, that somehow represented that country or culture more than someone from a less common background. There was a flurry of discussion, all of it interesting, all very thought-provoking.

I would say the majority of responses were essentially “it doesn’t matter as long as the sending district does not engage in any intentional deception. Many examples were given of multi-national districts sending students with varying ethnic backgrounds. As reported by Roy Joseph and Bob White of District 6990, South Florida and Grand Bahama Island, in some years they have sent as many as eight Outbounds with nationalities/passports from somewhere other than the USA or Grand Bahama Island, all representing the USA or Grand Bahama, and all representing District 6990.

They do not send a student born in Latin America to a similar Latin American country, but instead to a culture quite different from either the USA or Latin America. Our club in District 6220 once hosted an Inbound from Denmark who was born Korean, but adopted shortly after birth. She was raised Danish in every way, except that she looked Korean. She was an outstanding Inbound and represented Demark and Youth Exchange quite well.

These responses, in turn, reminded me of discussions I have had, off and on, with YEOs from around the world, over a period of more than twenty-two years, about why we participate in Youth Exchange, what constitutes a good exchange student and what the purpose or purposes of Youth Exchange are. Ask any YEO, parent, student or host parent why they participate and you will hear things like:

- I want to help with world peace
- I like to see the changes students go through
- I want to promote international understanding
- I want to learn about new cultures
- I want to give back what Rotary gave to me

Now the people who give the last response are usually either parents of exchange students, host parents or former exchange students themselves. Over the years, a few former exchange students have actually become YEOs, and we have often had at least one or two former students as leaders in Youth Exchange, like Ivan Vianna and Ana Maria Pimenta of Brasil. But we’ve been doing this long term exchange for over 50 years now. The number of former exchange students in our ranks as YEOs has grown, and they

help make our program better and better. Will all the Rotarians in the audience who are former exchange students please stand and be recognized?

But we do have divergence in why we do what we do. Different country representatives will give different criteria they use to select students. Some want the “best of the best” to be ambassadors of their countries – students who will help the program. Others look for students with the potential to benefit personally from the experience, who can grow from being exchange students – students who will be helped by the program. Some want students who can have a positive impact on their own countries and communities when they come home after a year abroad. And these are just a few examples. But they serve to illustrate that even though we all may believe in Youth Exchange and we may all work long hours to make it happen, we are not all doing it for the same reasons. And that may be perfectly ok. But it also means that we may do our programs differently. Some of us may see problems where others see opportunities to learn. Some of us may be quick to terminate a problem exchange when others of us may work far beyond reason to preserve an exchange that has gone beyond repair.

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned from being in this program is the widely varying reasons Rotarians, families, students and others participate. My opinions of “good” and “bad” reasons to have the program, “right” or “wrong” motives for a student to participate, even the ultimate objective or objectives of the exchange program have expanded to become very inclusive. I still have my own opinions about good and bad reasons to go on exchanges. Certainly sending any student with identified problems that could clearly cause the exchange to fail, or that could jeopardize future exchanges with that country or district would be irresponsible. Unfortunately, I have seen and heard statements from parents that they wanted to send their son or daughter on exchange because the parents were going through a divorce, and they thought that might spare them some emotional pain. That is certainly an example of a bad reason.

But I remember sitting at a session of the EEMA Conference in Madrid in 2008. A wonderful young Spanish Rebound was giving a talk about her exchange to the USA. She talked about her learning about herself, the American culture to which she was exposed, and learning more about what it meant to be Spanish as well. It was fantastic. Then, toward the end, almost as an afterthought she added, “The only reason I went on exchange was that my father wanted me to”!

When many districts interview Outbound candidates, that kind of a statement raises a big “caution” flag. But what if she had been denied the opportunity? What a shame that would have been. I am no longer so quick to dismiss a reason as “bad” or at least not so quick to conclude that a “bad” reason to go will result in a failed exchange.

So am I saying it doesn’t matter how we select, that we don’t need to do training, that anyone can be successful without our help, regardless of their reasons for going on exchange? Not at all. I think I share the value of many of you, that we are committed to the continuous improvement of every aspect of Youth Exchange. And this leads to what you can expect from this meeting. The threads of quality exchanges are woven throughout this meeting. We have already heard from our RP President elect Ray Klinginsmith – a pioneer in the South Central Multidistrict in the USA. We have heard from RI President John Kenny whose deeply moving experience as a Boy Scout at an international Jamboree has given him insight into the profound effect international contact at the formative years of youth can have.

We will hear from RI President Nominee Kaylan Banerjee and introduce ourselves as YEOs to him, continuing the tradition of having the Youth Exchange program welcome every future RI President.

We have been given the challenge from Foundation Manager John Osterlund to bring service into the forefront of Youth Exchange. We can make eradicating Polio an shelter boxes annual service projects within Youth Exchange. This is one of the many things that distinguishes Rotary Youth Exchange from a travel agency.

And what next? Look at the variety and quality of the Plenary topics. Al Kalter will tell us about the Business of Rotary Youth Exchange. Al got a standing ovation for his presentation in San Diego, and it was the first time, at least in a long while, that an actual Youth Exchange officer addressed all of the DGNs about Youth Exchange. When you hear Al talk, you will further understand the difference between the Rotary Youth Exchange Program and a Travel Agency.

Walt Wyser will tell us about the final development of the Quality Assurance Initiative, first seriously addressed in Salt Lake City when Andrew Page's stand in (Remember Andrew?) challenged us to take this seriously. Walter has stuck with this for a long, long time.

And speaking of quality, Pauline Perrault will tell us about reexamining your district and reinvigorating your program. She's the lady from the district that developed the famous "Bes". I heard Pauline give this talk in Chicago and again in Taiwan. I will use a baseball term and say I think she and her district have hit a home run. Or should I say scored a hat trick? You get the idea.

Barry Star will tell us about how their district did a combination QA review and strategic planning session as a voluntary peer review. How cool is that? We can so easily get caught up in the deadlines and administrative demands of the program, and external reviews, from RI, from CSIET, from the US Department of State, etc., that we forget we can improve the quality of what we do by stepping back and looking critically at what we do.

And we will get what have become standard parts of this meeting – reports from the RI Youth Exchange staff and the various regional and national youth exchange associations. It is a joy to me to see the continued cooperation and collaboration among our groups, developing such things as the Long and Short Term applications, the global insurance initiative, data-based application programs and planning for online training, to highlight a few.

And as they say in the Ronco television commercials – but wait! There's more. Look at the workshops being offered. If you are with a group from your district or region, consider carefully which sessions you want to attend. The topics range from perennial issues like early returns and helping Rebound students adjust, to new ideas we have not dealt with before – like how to use the QA manual and how to deal with the next generation of Rotarians and Youth Exchange students.

We will hear from Friedrich Neddermeier and Justin Burnett about how to do a one way exchange, as a way to reach out to new youth exchange countries. We will learn about written (I repeat, written) exchange agreements from Ekkehard Musick, Sharon Miller and Al Kalter. They will tell us how written exchange agreements may be the single most important document you can develop in working with exchange

partners to assure consistent quality exchanges. As I said, we will get an orientation on how to use the QA manual itself from hard working Walter Wyser.

We will hear about the Rebound experience with a experimental tag team presentation from an old guy, me and a rebound, and leader in Rotex, Justin Burnett. I will go point by point through the theory of reverse culture shock and Justin will tell how it really was in his experience.

We will hear the fundamentals of Youth Exchange from Neil McDonald and David Moreman in the A to Z (zed) session.

We will revisit the early return issue, including how we can help that student and the family, whose exchange year was not completed, for whatever reason. Herman Meier will give us a new sensitivity to their needs. They have to reintegrate into their post exchange lives and it isn't often a pleasant experience for them.

We will hear about what's really going on the the Ipod world of our students, and some of the trouble we can help them avoid. Terri Sawyer and Luiz Spengler will help open our eyes to the Ipod culture. the And we will hear about ways to become a younger Rotary – younger clubs, newer ideas, and ways to make Youth Exchange better from Pauline Perrault, Roger Cline and Hugues Polveche.

And finally, also woven throughout the meeting are discussion groups. Once upon a time, not so long ago, we didn't have discussion groups. Each year we had this big group of experienced YEOs from all over the world, just sitting listening to presentations. We would have perhaps ten minutes at the end of a session for questions and comments. Now, repeated small group discussions have become a mainstay of these meetings, where we actually exchange ideas and experiences on topics important to us. Recorders will give us full reports that we can take back and use in our programs. Have I left anyone out?

We have come a long way from the days when YEOs asked permission to gather for a meeting prior to the annual RI convention. There has been a steady tradition of working to make Youth Exchange better. This meeting is a virtual banquet of ideas, resources and talented people ready to present us with a feast. So let's get on with it. Bon Appetite!