

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



FOR YEARS, SUSANNE AND I hosted many Rotary Youth Exchange students in our home. This program was an entry point to Rotary for me, and my heart is truly in it. When Rotary's exchange programs were suspended because of COVID-19 to keep students and families safe, we felt sorry, especially for the participants, because those years cannot be repeated.

Because of the many uncertainties of the pandemic, the Rotary Board has decided to suspend in-person exchanges through June 2022. As we look ahead with hope, we thank Youth Exchange officers, host families, and volunteers for their contributions in years past, and we encourage districts to offer virtual exchanges as a way of connecting students around the world with each other and with our communities.

For those who are not able to participate in Rotary Youth Exchange, Rotary offers other opportunities. New Generations Service Exchange (NGSE) is a Rotary program that deserves wider recognition: It is an excellent opportunity for young people ages 18 to 30 to participate in community service as individuals or in a group and to gain internship experience. Simukai Matshalaga, a Rotaractor from Zimbabwe, stayed with us in Ratzeburg during her NGSE experience three years ago.

When I applied for the New Generations Service Exchange program, I did not realize that I was signing up for a life-changing experience. This program gave me that opportunity and much more. It taught me about the importance of failing fast, learning quicker, and being myself.

Some of my greatest experiences happened at the dinner table. The warmth and kindness of every home I lived in still resonate with me today. It took me weeks to understand how a stranger could care for me as deeply as these

members of the Rotary family did. I am inspired by the lessons of humility I learned from all the amazing people I met. I came to understand a new culture and realized that the only things that separate us as people are our experiences and, at times, our false assumptions.

Professionally, it gave me confidence in my own abilities as an engineer. Seeing how other organizations handled problems made me aware that the best person to solve the challenges in my country was me. Returning home from northern Germany, I declined a promotion, quit my job, and began building a family business — a decision that previously I would have never made, out of fear.

I am indebted to the Rotary family. I am not sure whether the friends, mentors, and families I left behind knew that they changed my life permanently. I hope they now do.

New Generations Service Exchange changed Simukai's life. It can change yours, too. All Rotary members can experience something similar at any time: I encourage everyone to take a virtual journey this month and visit meetings of other clubs online. You will see how different Rotary is around the world as you meet great people and make new friends.

Let us build upon these connections forged online — and later, when the time is right, enjoy in-person exchanges through Rotary Friendship Exchange, another excellent program for Rotary members of all ages.

Our ability to meet in person is limited now, but we know that *Rotary Opens Opportunities*, always. Now is the time to get ready, so that when the pandemic is behind us, Rotary's exchange programs will come back stronger than before, serving a world that is yearning to reconnect.

HOLGER KNAACK

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