

Reprint

# Join the

by Matthew C. Brown



A handful of Harry Franke's recruits joins him at the Milwaukee Art Museum's addition, designed by Santiago Calatrava and supported by Milwaukee Rotarians. In the back, from left: James McDonald, Maria Melendes, Lamont McLoughlin, Patrick Murphy, Harry Franke (in bow tie), Thomas Lonzo (behind Franke), Gilbert Boese, Thelma Sias, Nathan Fishbach, Jane Pirsig, Lawrence Clancy, F. Patrick Matthews, Joseph Rice. In the front: James Stiehl, Velvlee Wiley, Deborah Fugenschuh, Christopher Jaekels (lying on floor), Mary Beth Malm, Angela Brunhart, Robert Heger.

# club For Harry Franke, 'Everyone is a potential Rotarian.'



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYCE HENSON





I t's difficult to envision today's Rotary Club of Milwaukee without Harry Franke,

who has been a member since 1960. In addition to his many leadership roles – he's served as treasurer, as president, and as governor of District 6270 – he tirelessly recruits new Rotarians. Indeed, 59 people in the club, or nearly 15 percent of the current members, were brought in by Franke. And that's not counting the 40 or so who have passed away, moved, or dropped out.

‘Of late, I’ve averaged 10 or 12 members a year.’ – Harry Franke

“I didn’t do any [recruiting] my first 10 or 15 years [as a Rotarian],” he says. “But, of late, I’ve averaged 10 or 12 members a year.”

Charming and avuncular, Franke is, above all, an optimist, a trait displayed in his sanguine Rotary anecdotes: about hosting Youth Exchange students from overseas; about leading a Group Study Exchange team to Mexico; and about helping to “reignite Rotary” in places like Warsaw, Poland, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

“I feel indebted to Rotary for those experiences,” he says. “There are just so many facets – the international as well as within the community – that I think are attractive.”

Franke’s earnest enthusiasm is integral to his recruiting success. So, too, is the fact that he serves on not-

for-profit boards, which he says are fertile sources in which to find would-be Rotarians. “These are everything from the Boy Scouts to the Girl Scouts to performing arts organizations. I’ve used them as a seed bed.”

But he has also discovered potential Rotarians in many other places – for example, right at Cooke & Franke, the law firm where he is of counsel and where he goes every business day. (“Sometimes on Saturdays, too.”) Chris Jaekels, president of the Milwaukee club in 2004-05, says that shortly after he was hired at Cooke & Franke in

1992, Franke posited the idea of his becoming a Rotarian. Jaekels was 32 years old then. He says that Franke, though an octogenarian, is especially adept at recruiting young members. (It’s worth noting that Franke has shepherded people not just to his own club but to others as well.)

“Everyone is a potential Rotarian in Harry’s book,” Jaekels says. “He wants to make the world a better place. And as part of doing that he keeps Rotary in mind everywhere he goes.”

Jaekels says Franke has also adapted to significant changes in the past 45 years. When he joined the Milwaukee club, it comprised a lot of mid- and late-career corporate executives, all men. Now, Jaekels says, “he’s recruiting large numbers of people that better represent our society.”

One is Sister Camille Kliebhan, chancellor of Cardinal Stritch University. Franke brought her into the club, in 1987, and she went on to become president. Another is Thelma Sias, vice president of local affairs for the utility We Energies. She’s been a Rotarian since 1997. “Harry Franke is one of those people who respects and understands diversity,” she says. “He looks at the club as being an inclusive organization.”

Sias, who is African American, fondly recalls her initial discussion with Franke. He explained the club’s involvement with Second Harvest of Wisconsin – a hunger-relief organization – and the value of The Four-Way Test, both of which, she says, were important for her to know. She remembers, too, that Franke was well-prepared; he knew, for example, on which community boards she served. “He had a full understanding of who I was,” she says.

With potential Rotarians, one of the first things Franke does is invite them to a club meeting, which he believes provides an ideal recruiting tool. He cites a couple of this year’s speakers: the commissioner of city development and the associate director of Harvard University’s Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. “People are glad to hear that sort of person,” he says, adding that there’s always a presentation by one of the club’s committees, too. Plus, more often than not, someone from abroad is on hand – a Youth



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– Thelma Sias

Exchange student or Ambassadorial Scholar. The guest, then, “is going to get more than just an organized luncheon,” which one suspects Franke would have little use for.

The club seats its visitors at a designated table, where the chair of the recruiting committee is often found. “I make sure that they meet the people who will impress them with Rotary,” Franke says. Later, he might take his guest on a tour of the War Memorial Center, the striking landmark on Lake Michigan’s shoreline where the club gathers each Tuesday at noon.

Publications are another of his recruiting tools. When he’s able, Franke mails the club bulletin to invitees, allowing them to choose which upcoming speaker they find most compelling. Once, he says, a guest of his attended three meetings before “taking the bait,” which underscores both Franke’s patience and his persistence.

Not surprisingly, Franke doesn’t stop once he’s brought someone to a meeting. “After you’ve had a prospective member there,” he says, “you

have to follow up.” How does he do this? Typically he’ll send more information – such as the club bulletin – along with a membership application.

When asked about challenges to membership recruitment, Franke mentions competition. “There are so many other things for people to do today,” he says. “I know that metropolitan [clubs] are having a tougher time keeping the membership up – and I don’t only mean Rotary. I mean Kiwanis and Lions and all of them.”

Similarly, he says, urban populations – and the businesses that employ them – are far more transient than they were a half-century ago. In general, too, the demands of the workplace have increased. An example: Years ago, he brought to the club the president of Johnson Controls, a Milwaukee-based company. However, Franke says, the current president isn’t a Rotarian. The reason? “He’s traveling around the

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– Chris Jaekels

world. He couldn’t take a commitment of 60 percent of the Tuesdays in a year [and] wouldn’t even think of doing it.”

The upside is that with fewer corporate CEOs and the like, there is more variance in the careers of current members. For instance, when Franke recruited Marissa Weaver a few years ago, she was executive director of the Black Holocaust Museum. “You don’t think of that as

a traditional Rotary classification,” Jaekels says. “That didn’t stop Harry. In fact, he thought that’s what the ‘new’ Rotary needed.”

Jaekels believes the club will reap the benefits of Franke’s recruitment efforts well into the future. As he searches for prospective Rotarians, Franke is often first to approach local organizations and businesses. Even years from now, the club will still be finding new mem-



bers in those places. “So there’s a Harry Franke legacy,” Jaekels says.

Franke, for his part, doesn’t seem quite ready to be thought of in those terms. He’s still focused on the present. “I’m getting one [new member] a month so far this year,” he says. And that trend isn’t likely to change any time soon. ■

*Matthew C. Brown is a former associate editor of The Rotarian.*