

At the heart of a humanitarian

Gary Huang is one of the few Asians to assume the post of Rotary International president, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

As a 17-year-old youth leader, you're impressed with the work done by members of a particular international organisation. While you may consider working with the organisation when you leave school, do you dare dream of becoming its global leader in 50 years?

This is what happened to Gary Huang. Next year, Huang, 68, will be the first Taiwanese to become president of Rotary International, an international service organisation which aims to bring together business and professional leaders to provide humanitarian services, encourage high ethical standards in all vocations, and help build goodwill and peace in the world.

During his whistle-stop trip to Malaysia recently, he says: "I was invited to a lunch in Taipei. It was the first time I had to eat using a fork and knife. And all around me were people I'd only seen on TV."

He pauses, then adds: "At that time, it was still black and white TV. These people were business leaders. I thought they would talk business, but all they talked about was service and how to help people improve their lives. I knew I wanted to be part of that organisation."

Huang's active involvement with the Rotary Club began after he completed his undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in the US. "I majored in Insurance Coverage and Business Administration," he says. Back in Taiwan, he started out as an underwriter and, in time, rose to become the chairman of Taiwan Sogo Shinkong Security Co., Ltd., Shin Kong Real Estate Service Co., and P.S. Insurance Agency.

"One day, my client invited me to one of the Rotary Club's meetings. I remembered this group from before and I was determined to become a member."

However, his application was turned down three times and the excuse given was that he was too young. This went on for several months until his application was finally approved.

THE ROTARIAN

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PICTURES BY HALIMATON SAADIAH SULAIMAN

governor, foundation trustee, international director and vice-president. For his efforts, he has been awarded multiple awards from the National Civic Service Award by the Federation of Non-Profit Associations and the Outstanding Community Service Award by the Ministry of the Interior R.O.C to Rotary International's Service Above Self Award and Rotary Foundation's Citation for Meritorious Service.

Huang attributes part of his success to being multi-lingual. "I can speak in English, Mandarin, Cantonese and Taiwanese lingo (similar to Hokkien)." That said, he illustrates his work by referring to projects carried out in a country where hardly any Mandarin, Cantonese or Taiwanese is spoken — India.

A major project was to eradicate polio. According to Huang, Rotary clubs worldwide have contributed more than US\$1.2 billion (RM3.58 billion) towards ending polio, with Rotary clubs in Taiwan accounting for more than US\$5.9 million. Indeed, the Taiwanese government has invested US\$3 million in global polio eradication.

He was part of a team of Taipei Rotarians who went to India to immunise children against polio. There is obvious pride in his voice when he says: "India has now been removed from the list of polio-endemic countries. I first visited India almost 20 years ago. We went to Bombay. At the time, the project was to help people who needed artificial limbs like hands. I could see that the money was there, but it wasn't being managed properly. So, I wrote a report that helped to ensure that

STORY OF ROTARY INTERNATIONAL

TO understand how Rotary International works, Datuk M. Ram Nair (past president of the Rotary Club, Malaysia) says that it's necessary to first appreciate its history:

"The first Rotary Club of Chicago was formed in 1905 by a lawyer called Paul Harris. He started it with three others — all men."

Tongue-in-cheek, he adds: "They were all lonely men."

The name of the club is derived from the fact that the meetings used to rotate among the members' offices. Indeed, to honour Paul Harris, for many years, Rotarians preserved the original meeting place in Room 711 in Chicago's Unity Building. Before the building was demolished in 1989, Rotarians dismantled the office and salvaged many items including doors and radiators. In 1993, the board of directors of Rotary International set aside a permanent home for the restored Room 711 on the 16th floor of Rotary International World Headquarters in Evanston, Illinois.

Today, the club's mission has expanded beyond serving members' professional and social interests. They pool together their resources and contribute their talents to help serve communities in need. To see this in practice, Datuk Ram tells the

story of a project aimed at helping a group of severely physically and mentally disabled people in Kuala Kubu Baru.

"Hydrotherapy helps these people," he says. "So we built them a swimming pool and found volunteers who agreed to work with them. However, once the project was completed, we were faced with a huge problem which we hadn't considered before. These people couldn't control their bowels when they were inside the pool. Despite being out of budget, we had to modify the pool. This was a sudden and massive expenditure. With our networking and connections, we were able to find the means to do this."

Echoing Datuk Ram, Dr Rajindar Singh, Rotary public image coordinator, says: "Rotarians mobilise volunteers."

For the future, the Rotary Club has decided to focus on six areas, namely, peace and conflict resolution, water and sanitation, basic education and literacy, maternal and child health, disease prevention and treatment and, community and economic development.

Rajindar adds: "In Malaysia, we are focusing on innovative ways to help eradicate dengue."

the grants were not stopped. That meant that the project continued and we were able to help many people."

During another trip, to a village outside Agra, Huang visited a group of students in a newly-built school. "They were all sitting on the floor. They wanted a fan and there was no light. The children had beautiful eyes. I could see that without light, they would lose their eyesight. So, instead of giving them a fan, we got a quotation of how much it would cost to install lights and supply the desks. Finally, US\$60,000 came from the Taiwan Rotary Club and US\$20,000 came from local clubs."

Visiting the South Asian subcontinent hasn't been without its challenges. He turns to his wife, Corinna Yao, then admits that both of them found the food in India unpalatable. "The food we had was lousy and we could only eat bread every day," he says.

Still Huang stayed the course and during his most recent trip to a village outside Chennai (quaintly called Happy Village), the project was to build a toilet for the village. In a tone bordering on incredulous, Huang says: "Can you imagine? In a village with 500 people, there will be one toilet."

MAKING LINKS

As the 104th president of Rotary International, Huang says that his priority is to grow the organisation's membership base by attracting quality men and women committed to improving communities worldwide through volunteer service.

Currently, Rotary International has 1.2 million members in 34,000 clubs spread over 200 countries. As such, he foresees travelling extensively.

"I left Taipei on April 1 and I'm only going home today (May 12). Then, in another three days, I'm off again, first to Japan, then the US, then Argentina and others. This trip will be for another four weeks."

There is a drawback to all this travel. "We have no time. Our organisation is very big, geographically. With 1.2 million members in 34,000 clubs spread over 200 countries, I need to travel a lot. This is to help me understand the problems faced and see how I can make links between people in one country who have money and those in another who need it."

The conviction with which he speaks leaves you in no doubt that Huang will have no time for sight-seeing.