



Rotary District 7570



RYLA 2011 Highlights

30 Years of Developing Young Leaders in Western Virginia
By Ernest Bentley

The Rotary Youth Leadership Awards Seminar, RYLA, wrapped up its 30th consecutive year on December 2-4 in Blacksburg, Virginia. Over 140 high school students sponsored by 51 local Rotary Clubs attended this year's session according to Megan Franklin, chairman of the Rotary District Youth Leadership Committee.

This year's RYLA was marked by two special events. Blacksburg High School graduate Minoka Gunesequera received the first annual Henderson Graham scholarship award in recognition of her demonstrated leadership since attending RYLA as a high school student. Minoka was president and homecoming queen of the Blacksburg High School Senior class. She has been very active in her local church and made several mission trips abroad. While still in high school she was an exchange student in Australia. Upon graduation Minoko enrolled for a year at George Mason University before returning to VT for her sophomore year.

The entire RYLA class participated in an international nutritional program on Saturday afternoon. The students were bused to Blacksburg Presbyterian Church where they packed over 15,000 packages of high nutritional rations to be shipped abroad.

RYLA originated in 1960 in Australia when local Rotary clubs were asked to create a youth event to help celebrate the centennial of Queensland. The first RYLA program in western Virginia was started in 1981 under the leadership of Rotary District Governor Henderson Graham of Marion. Graham was recognized at a banquet in his honor on Saturday evening.

The core of every RYLA program is to build self confidence and esteem; teach the fundamentals of leadership; demonstrate effective communications skills for good leadership and to learn more about Rotary's purpose and service to our communities. The annual program has become so popular with schools in western Virginia that several of them offered to pay the registration fees this year to assure their students would be able to attend.

The RYLA program began with arrival of students at noontime on Friday Dec. 2. The intense 48 hour period of leadership training began as students learned about their individual characteristics through the annually popular "Discovering Your True Colors" which also served as an ice-breaker for the students from throughout western Virginia. The rest of the weekend was filled with leadership exercises including lessons in etiquette and protocol by Kathleen Harshberger; learning about Rotary's Role in addressing world hunger; workshops by leaders from the VT Corps of Cadets and hearing from successful entrepreneurs.

A Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration banquet program was held Saturday evening. Ned Lester, Eric Adamson and Jim Owen presented the history of RYLA in D7570 after which Miss Virginia, Elizabeth Crott spoke about "Get Involved – Change Your World!"

The annual RYLA weekend is the culmination of months of preparation each year. Many prominent civic and social leaders from western Virginia are asked to participate by leading the workshops.