

**The Women in Rotary Story
The Role played by
The Rotary Club of Seattle-International District**

Hwa-Tsun Feng
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This essay is adapted from a talk I have presented close to a dozen times in the last thirty years to Seattle-International District Rotary Club and many other Rotary clubs on the Seattle-International District Rotary's role in bringing women into Rotary International.

May 4, 1987

May 4, 1987, was an important day in Rotary history. On that date, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Rotary International could not exclude a small club in California that had inducted women.

There was another big story that day, however, that claimed the top headline. That evening, Tom Brokaw of the *NBC Nightly News* led with the story of Gary Hart, the Democratic Senator from Colorado and Presidential candidate, who was accused of having an affair with Donna Rice, a young model. The Rotary story was the third one that evening.

The next morning, the front page of the *New York Times* devoted two columns above the fold to the Hart story and one to the Rotary story.

I tell the Gary Hart story here only to give those of us "old" enough to remember Gary Hart a reference point; May 4, 1987, was a very significant day for Rotary as well. This essay will tell the role that the Rotary Club of Seattle-International District played in the Women in Rotary story.

The Duarte Rotary Club Story

The Rotary Club of Duarte is a relatively small Rotary Club in Southern California. In 1977, it admitted three women to its membership contrary to the Constitution of Rotary International ("RI"). When RI found out what the Duarte Club had done, it revoked the club's charter and its membership in RI.

After its appeal to RI's International Convention was unsuccessful, the Duarte Club filed suit against RI in the California Superior Court for the County of Los Angeles, alleging that RI's action violated California's Unruh Civil Rights Act and seeking to enjoin RI from enforcing its restrictions against admitting women members. The California Superior Court ruled against the Duarte Club. Upon appeal, the California State Court of Appeal reversed the Superior Court's ruling and ordered the Duarte Club's reinstatement. After the California Supreme Court denied RI's petition for review, RI appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Seattle-International District Rotary Club Story

In early 1984, I learned that a Rotary Club was being formed in Seattle's International District and Chinatown area. All I knew about Rotary then was that it was a

worldwide service organization and it had individual Rotary clubs around the world. I also knew that members of Rotary clubs were prominent business and professional men in its communities. I was flattered to be asked to be one of the first members of the club, but my initial reaction was negative, because I knew there were only men in Rotary clubs. I did not want to belong to something that openly discriminated against women.

I knew there were many Rotary Clubs in the Greater Seattle area and was surprised that the International District/Chinatown area did not have one. I debated with myself whether I wanted to be a charter member of this new Rotary Club. Even though I did not know exactly what kind of community service a typical Rotary club performs, I thought it would be a good thing for the area. So I gradually changed my mind and decided to join the effort to start a new Rotary Club, thinking naively that maybe I could do something to change Rotary's discriminatory policy; but, deep in my heart, I told myself that it would never happen.

Boy was I wrong!

The person leading the effort to form the new Rotary Club was Lloyd Hara, Seattle City Treasurer at the time. Lloyd was asked by the then-Governor of District 503 to lead the effort of starting a club in Seattle's International District/Chinatown area. Rotary District 503 at the time covered most of Western Washington and Alaska. (This District was later reconfigured and renumbered 5030; it no longer has the Alaska clubs under its jurisdiction.)

When I finally met with the twenty-five men¹ brought together by Lloyd Hara to embark on this effort, I was impressed and delighted: impressed because Lloyd brought together a diverse group of business and professional men, some I knew and most I did not; delighted because I quickly discovered that many of the men agreed that it was wrong to exclude women and wanted to do something about it.

I remember meeting Jim Johnson at one of the initial meetings. Jim was the owner of MC Machinery, a business on Dearborn Street near the International District. Jim, a Minnesota farm boy with an MBA from Stanford, told the story that when he was asked to join this venture and to recruit other leaders of the community, he soon went to see Ginny McCormac, the Executive Director of the Seattle Goodwill, his neighbor on Dearborn Street, only to be told by Ginny that she couldn't join because Rotary did not allow women in its ranks. Jim thought that was wrong and recruited Ginny's deputy, a man, to join the group.

I remember meeting Ahmed Jaddi, a structural engineer with a Master's degree from Columbia University, and who played a significant role in the building of the St. Louis Arch. Like me, he had been born overseas (in his case, in India) and lived many years in the U.S. Ahmed also expressed his strong opinion that it was wrong to exclude women. I remember thinking his opinion interesting, because I thought India did not exactly treat women as equals, and I attributed his feelings to his many years living in the U.S.

I remember meeting Phil Ginsberg, a lawyer with stellar credentials: Princeton and Harvard Law. While I do not remember exactly when Phil and I discussed the issue, I do remember clearly that this group of twenty-five men decided to challenge Rotary International's policy of excluding women from the start, by submitting our proposed charter documents without the "men only" language contained in the Rotary's boiler-plate club constitution and bylaws. RI returned our charter application unapproved. After

some discussion, the charter members decided to resubmit our application to comply with RI's boilerplate language, and committed ourselves to change RI's "men only" policy from within the Rotary system after the club was formed.

RI approved our revised application and The Rotary Club of Seattle-International District was born in September of 1984. Lloyd Hara, our founder, became our first president in the Rotary year 1984-85 (running from July 1 to June 30).

Shortly after the club's formation, we formed the Women in Rotary Committee to work on bringing women into Rotary. The six members of that committee included Phil Ginsberg, Ahmed Jaddi, and me. At the time, Jim Johnson was president-elect of the club and would be our president for the Rotary year 1986-87.

Given our goal to work within the Rotary system to bring women into Rotary, the committee's mission was really to develop a plan to accomplish that goal.

To get an idea how the other clubs in District 503 felt about the issue, our club sent representatives to the 1985 and 1986 District Conferences to present motions for Rotary to admit women. The vote was about two-to-one in favor in 1985, and eight-to-one in favor in 1986. So, there was strong support for admitting women Rotarians, but that support was far from being overwhelming, let alone unanimous.

We knew that these district votes were just "feel good" votes, because Rotary Clubs' membership policy was not governed by a majority vote of any individual club or individual district. We were keenly aware that to realize the goal of admitting women into Rotary, the constitution of Rotary International would need to be changed. We soon learned that RI holds a Council on Legislation every three years, attended by representatives of all Rotary districts around the world to consider changes to its constitution: the next Council on Legislation would take place in 1986.

Our club approved our committee's proposal to submit a resolution to the Council on Legislation proposing to strike the "men only" language from Rotary's governing documents.

RI's 1986 Council on Legislation took place in early February in Chicago. Bob Ladd, a past Governor of District 503, was our district's representative to that council. Mr. Ladd told us that our resolution was combined with other similar resolutions and was soundly defeated by a voice vote, and he estimated that the voices opposing the combined resolution were twice as loud as those supporting the resolution.

For such a resolution to pass a two-to-one in favor margin was required, so Ladd's report that the "Women in Rotary" resolution failed by such a large margin was a huge disappointment to us. We asked ourselves: "How long would it take for a third of the Rotary districts in the world to change their minds?" Our educated guess was that left on its own, Rotary probably would not change its "men only" policy for many years to come, very possibly not in the 20th Century.

It was then that the Women in Rotary Committee decided we simply did not want to wait that long. We decided to take matters "into our own hands."

We wanted to add women members to our club, but we did not want to have our charter revoked as the Duarte Club's was. Phil Ginsberg and I, the lawyers on the committee, thought we needed to seek the court's protection to enjoin Rotary International from revoking our charter after we admitted women in our ranks.

The six members of the Women in Rotary Committee knew not all of the 25 charter members felt as strongly as we did in "fighting" to bring women into Rotary.

Thus the committee began a campaign of persuading fellow club members who were “on the fence” to support the effort. In time, all 25 club members supported the idea of aggressively pursuing the goal of admitting women into our club.

We knew that the Duarte case was being considered by the U.S. Supreme Court and thought a decision supporting the Duarte Club could force Rotary to admit women in California, as the Duarte lawsuit was based on California’s public accommodations laws. The effect of a favorable Supreme Court ruling on the rest of America was unknown to us at the time. We also knew that the Duarte case could be decided as late as June of 1987, the end of the court’s 1986-87 term.

On July 31, 1986, the Rotary Club of Seattle-International District held an evening Club Assembly. The Women in Rotary Committee presented its strategy and made a motion to aggressively pursue the goal of admitting women into our club. The vote to support the motion was unanimous. We had decided not to wait for things over which we did not have control and we moved to admit women as soon as possible.

We knew that RI had revoked the Duarte Club’s charter upon learning of their infraction. Not wanting to suffer the same fate, we thought we needed to pursue redress in the courts. To that end, we started to look for a law firm that would take our case.

Phil Ginsberg, a well known litigator in Seattle, knew such an effort required resources he didn’t have himself; he managed to persuade Margaret McKeown,² a senior litigation partner at Perkins Coie, Seattle’s biggest law firm then and now, to represent us. What’s more, the Perkins Coie firm agreed to take our case on a *pro bono* basis.

Margaret’s advice was to go ahead with our plan to admit women, whereupon she would immediately file a lawsuit against RI in the Federal District Court in Seattle to enjoin RI from revoking our charter as it did Duarte’s.

Thus began a flurry of activity for the Women in Rotary Committee and the entire club. We decided to admit many women at once, not just a few. We believed we wouldn’t have trouble finding well-qualified women to join us and reasoned that admitting a large cohort would reduce the pressure and possibly unwelcome attention these individual members might face. Thus the whole club was involved in the recruiting effort.

The women we recruited were a most impressive group. I remember telling my fellow male members of the club that these fifteen women were qualitatively more impressive than that the forty or so male members of the club at the time. Among the women were a Seattle City Councilwoman, the founder and publisher of the local Chinese-language newspaper, the Chair of Puget Sound Water Quality (a leading environmental group), a Senior Vice President of Federal Home Loan bank, the Executive Director of Puget Sound Big Sisters, owners of several businesses and consultant firms, and of course the Executive Director and President of Seattle Goodwill, the woman who told Jim Johnson she could not be a member of our club when Jim first tried to recruit her at the founding of the club.

We dubbed the candidates the “Seattle 15.”³

On September 6, 1986, the Board of Directors of the club admitted the fifteen women, setting off a flurry of activity in advance of the October 2 induction ceremony.

On September 15, the club filed suit against Rotary International in the Federal District Court in Seattle to prevent its expulsion by RI. On the same date, the club issued a news release announcing its admission of women and its lawsuit against RI.

In the news release, Jim Johnson, our president, said: “Rotary is a great organization. We are good Rotarians and we subscribe to everything Rotary stands for, except one – that it does not allow women as members.” Jim also said the club’s decision to admit women was unanimous, and stated the reasons to admit women succinctly: “one, it is wrong for Rotary, a business and professional organization, to discriminate; and two, our club will benefit and be better able to serve the community.”

Jim, the Minnesota farm boy, turned out to be a great spokesman for the club.

In the news release, Margaret McKeown, our lead lawyer, stated that Rotary International’s exclusion of women violated the “public accommodations” aspect of Washington State’s law against discrimination. She said, “It is rare for a public organization which has discriminatorily excluded women to make an effort from within to end discrimination.”

The news release also paid homage to the Duarte Club: “There has been a similar effort to admit women into the Rotary Club of Duarte, California. As a result, Rotary International expelled the Duarte Rotary. Last spring, the California Court of Appeals directed Rotary International to reinstate the Duarte Club. The California Supreme Court refused to hear Rotary International’s appeal and let the Appellate Court’s decision stand. Rotary International then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court but lost the first round, when Chief Justice-designate William Rehnquist denied Rotary International’s motion to stay the California Appellate Court’s decision.”

Along with the news release, Jim Johnson alerted John Henry, the Governor of Rotary District 503, of the club’s pending actions.

The local newspapers and television stations covered the club’s actions favorably.

In the meantime, the U.S. District Court in Seattle, shortly after our filing of the suit, granted our club’s request enjoining Rotary International from expelling our club. Thus our club was able to induct the Seattle 15 on October 2, 1986, without interference from Rotary International. In fact, Rotary International did virtually nothing to defend our lawsuit. Undoubtedly RI’s strategy at the time was to concentrate its efforts in the Duarte case then pending before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Since Rotary International was leaving us alone to conduct our affairs, our lawyers were content to do nothing more on our behalf, except for one important thing: they filed a Friend of the Court brief in the Supreme Court supporting the Duarte Club in its quest.

We all know now the Supreme Court announced its decision that Rotary International must reinstate Duarte Club’s charter on May 4, 1987.

In the Supreme Court case, *Board of Directors, Rotary International v. Rotary Club of Duarte*, Rotary International argued that its policy was guaranteed by the First Amendment’s freedom of association. The Duarte Club argued that RI’s policy discriminated against women pursuant to California’s Unruh Civil Rights Act.

In his 7-0 decision, Justice Lewis Powell held that Rotary International’s “male only” policy violates California’s Unruh Civil Rights Act: in a nutshell, any intrusion of RI’s freedom of association is justified because it serves the State’s compelling interests in eliminating discrimination against women and in assuring equal access to public accommodations.

On its surface, the Supreme Court’s decision only applies to Duarte and other Rotary Clubs in California. But because Washington State’s public accommodation laws

are similar to California's, we believed the case applied to us as well. Besides, RI had not defended our lawsuit and had essentially left our club alone. We continued to conduct our business as if nothing had happened.

We could, however, claim to be the only Rotary Club that had admitted women, in opposition to RI's long-standing policy, without having its charter revoked by Rotary International.

I succeeded Jim Johnson and became club president in the Rotary year 1987-88. Before I assumed the office, I attended RI's conference in Munich, Germany, in June 1987, shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the Duarte case. I asked my fellow attendees how they felt about changing Rotary's "men only" policy: the responses were generally negative. Generally, the younger Americans were more receptive but the support was still not overwhelming. Older American Rotarians I talked to were largely opposed to the idea. I remember I found the negative response of the American delegates surprising, given the recent Supreme Court ruling. As for Rotarians from other countries, the receptions of course varied. But I can say the overall response was quite negative.

In its 1989 Council on Legislation in Singapore, RI amended its Constitution removing the "men only" restriction.

The August 2015 issue of *The Rotarian* reported that there were just under 35,000 clubs as of February 2015 and over 1.2 million members. I also understand that currently about 20% of Rotarians are women. The percentage of women members in U.S. is undoubtedly higher. At our club, it is 45%.

Perhaps what our club attempted to do would have happened eventually anyway. We would most likely have admitted women into our club after the Supreme Court's decision in 1987 and certainly after RI's Council on Legislation in 1989

None of that takes away from my pride in telling this story. The Rotary Club of Seattle-International District admitted women before it was "allowed" in 1986, without losing its Rotary charter!

A year after my presidency, Karilyn vanSoest, one of the fifteen women first admitted to our club, became our president for the Rotary year 1988-89.⁴

¹ A list of the charter members can be found on the SeattleIDRotary.org website by tapping Club History.

² Margaret McKeown has been a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit since 1998, and has been mentioned as a possible Supreme Court nominee.

³ A list of the Seattle 15 can be found on the SeattleIDRotary.org website by tapping Club History.

⁴ A list of club presidents, from founding to the present day, can be found on the SeattleIDRotary.org website by tapping Club History.