

How the Rotary Peace Fellowship Changed My Life

Nai H. Wu

2005-07 Rotary Peace Fellow

It is my great honor to be standing in front of you to tell you my experience as a Rotary Peace Fellow and how this experience has changed my life. When Past RI President Carl-Wilhelm Stenhammar asked me whether I could give a talk during the International Assembly, I thought, why me? But yes, I do have an interesting story to tell you and demonstrate how this peace program has transformed my life and many other fellows like me. If you would stay with me for the next 15 minutes, I will take you on a journey from North America to Asia, from Asia to Africa, and from Africa back to where we are here.

I was born in Taiwan and came to the United States as a high school exchange student. I then subsequently pursued my bachelor's degree in management and international business and a master's degree in human relations at the University of Oklahoma. During my graduate study, I was deeply troubled by the trend of downsizing and corporate scandals. I felt that businesses could do good and bad things, and I believed that big corporations had a responsibility to become good global citizens and serve as a model to other entities. In essence, I felt corporations were responsible for improving social justice.

One day, a professor at my school mentioned Rotary, so I learned about the Rotary Peace Fellowship. I was fortunate to be referred to Rotary Foundation Trustee Ron Burton. After talking to him, I decided that I would apply for this fellowship. At that time, Ron Burton and District 5770 in Oklahoma decided to sponsor me as their applicant. I was not a U.S. citizen (and I am still not now), but they sponsored me anyway. It was my first experience with what Rotary is all about. There is no division of nationality, and Rotarians work together for a better world.

I was selected as one of the peace fellows to study at International Christian University in Tokyo. I learned a lot during my stay in Japan, and it was a wonderful opportunity. As part of the program, we were required to select a summer applied field experience, which is like an internship. I had two offers, one from the United Nations in New York City and one to work for 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai in Kenya. If you were me, I am pretty sure you would have made the same choice as I did. I chose to go to Kenya and worked for Wangari Maathai and her daughter at their organization, the Green Belt Movement. This is a picture of Wangari Maathai and me.

During my time there, I was the intern to the executive director, and my main responsibility was to assist in arranging the logistics for the World Social Forum to be held in Nairobi in January 2007. The WSF was held in Africa for the first time, and it is a forum where all civil societies from all over the world come together. I was the one in charge of preparing the Green Belt Movement to be presented. During my internship, I negotiated conference sites and gave my input at the highest strategic level on the planning of the events. I met many challenges. However, these challenges laid the foundation for my successes as well. I was extremely flexible and adaptable. I did not complain whenever things went wrong. I learned to listen first, watch my surroundings, and come out with the best solutions given the limited resources. As an intern, I had to work independently and learned to study about the nonprofit and political world in Kenya on my own. Frequently, I had to talk with the top nonprofit and local business people. In the end, I was able to represent the Green Belt Movement well and secured a few deals.

I learned so much when I was in Kenya from my boss, colleagues, and local Rotarians. For example:

This is a picture of Maathai standing in front of a tea field. She said it used to be filled with indigenous trees that bear fruits for food and could be used as fuel. However, now it is filled with tea plants, and they are not good for the soil and are only good for exporting. At the same time, farmers do not earn enough money from planting tea. Therefore, is it good for developing countries to grow tea or coffee? I think you can decide.

Here is a picture of the largest slum area in Nairobi. These children live in a place where there was no running water, no electricity, nothing, practically, except trash everywhere. This is where the idea of poverty hits me the most. What can we do for these children? I believe no one, no one, who has witnessed what I have seen could walk out of there and say, "I don't care."

The Rotary Peace Fellowship has been the best thing that ever happened in my life. Because of this experience, I am connected to Rotary Peace Fellows and Rotarians worldwide, instantly.

After attending the Rotary Peace Symposium in Salt Lake City, Gert Danielsen from Norway, a 2003-05 Rotary Peace Fellow at Universidad del Salvador, Buenos Aires, Argentina, said in an e-mail he sent to other fellows:

I was inspired in Salt Lake City. Very inspired. As Rotarians donate to our programme, I wanted to give something back, now that I am able to.... I am not rich. I am comfortable. I have huge debts, but I want to prioritise giving back, getting more fellows, from Africa, from disadvantaged countries and regions. I believe in peace education, long-term solutions. And I want to show Rotarians that I believe in the programme I benefited from. I hope you will join me.

Rotarians, this fellowship has trained more than 400 peace fellows. As of 1 September 2009, the majority of peace fellows are working in peace-related nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations. I believe this program is making a huge difference in promoting world peace. This pie chart will give you an idea of what kind of jobs peace fellows are working.

As for me, I am currently a PhD student in the management department at the Texas A&M University. My interest is in corporate social responsibility, and I want to work toward using business as an agent to benefit the world. I firmly believe we should remember that the purpose of life is not to make money and live comfortably, but rather to try to improve other people's lives and make this world a better place. We should work for the benefit of others and never lose sight of it.

Finally, Rotarians, I believe peace is possible. You are making a difference in eliminating polio, and now, you are making a difference in world peace. I truly feel that this world is a better place because of Rotarians' efforts. I want you to know that I am extremely grateful for the experience and that the investment you have made in this program is well worth it.

Thank you again for the incredible opportunity, and I promise you that we will never give up, never give up in making a difference in the world! Thank you for your support.