

Caldwell County Rotary Club, a History of Service to the Community

During the spring of 1982 a group of Lenoir area residents began efforts to start a new Rotary Club in the community. These efforts became the beginning of Caldwell County Rotary Club.

Official meetings of Caldwell County Rotary Club began on Tuesday June 28, 1982 at the Lenoir Holiday Inn. The meetings began at 6:44am. Former Lenoir Rotarians Dave Evans and Bob Styres, Sr. were the leaders in establishing the club. Evans became the first President of Caldwell County Rotary Club. It started with 34 charter members.

The official "Charter Night" celebration was held on September 2, 1982 at Cedar Rock Country Club. District Governor Aaron Hyatt from Sylva, who later went on to serve as Rotary International's Secretary, was among the special guests. Past District Governor Guy Bailey and long time Hickory Rotarian Walter Nau also spoke.

Members went to work almost immediately in the community. A Scholarship fund was established. The roots of High School Soccer were former as the club purchased goals and balls for each school. The games were played at Mack Cook Stadium. Caldwell County Rotary's team won the annual Lenoir Rotary Golf tournament and it helped to spark a friendly rivalry between the new club and it's founding sponsor. In January 1983, the club had it's first 100% attendance day, and ranked among the best attended clubs in the District.

Support for the young people in the community has always been at the heart of the club. On-going support for the Boy Scout Program began in the '83 -'84 year. That year also saw Caldwell County Rotary take the diamond at Lenoir Little League for the first time. Youth Leadership Camp attendees also got scholarship help from Caldwell County Rotary.

The Rotary International effort to eradicate Polio from the world began during the '84 -'85 year. Under the leadership of Jerry Kahill, Caldwell County Rotary contributed over \$4500 to Polio Plus that year.

The Caldwell Senior Center opened during the '86 -'87 year and Caldwell County Rotary played a major role. The club paid for the decoration of the Senior Center lobby, and furnished much of the labor for the effort. The club members participated in a Group Study Exchange that featured a team from Uruguay. Lobby efforts by Caldwell County Rotary members led to the Hibriten High School Chorus being featured entertainment at the annual District Conference held at Lake Junaluska. Bob Styres, Sr. became the first member to attend the International Conference held in Munich. John Dillard led the club effort at the County Fair Food

Booth, raising over \$2600.

A growth spurt hit the club in the late 1980's. Eighteen new members joined Caldwell County Rotary Club during the '87 - '88 year. The club closed the year with 60 members. For a few years, a labor Day Fun Day was sponsored by the club as the big fund raiser. It was held at Lenoir Optimist Park. Total club participation made it successful , but rather intense event.

Jerry Hodge was President during the '88 - '89 year. The Caldwell County Sports Hall of Fame was formed that year and the first induction ceremony was held. This is still the premier community service project for the club. Scholarships totaling \$1400 were given to deserving students. Funds were given to support academic booster programs at the 3 high schools.

Caldwell County Rotary was 66 members strong when the '90 - '91 year ended. Fifteen new members joined the club during the year Ron Beane was President. Attendance averaged 93% for the year. Caldwell County Rotary boasted 20 Paul Harris Sustaining members and donated over \$5000 to the Rotary Foundation. Over \$5400 was raised in the Wal-Mart raffle that went toward scholarships and other club community efforts.

Not everything has been great over the years. A "can't miss" fund raiser that failed came in the '91 - '92 year. In conjunction with the Bridge to Bridge Bike race, Caldwell Rotary members worked during the early morning hours to provide breakfast for the early risers. It was as lot of fun and fellowship, but only netted 21 cents after the bills were paid. So, we sold more raffle tickets at Wal-Mart, netting \$6500.

In recent years, scholarships honoring two deceased formers club presidents have benefit Caldwell County students. A golf tournament is held each year in memory of the two men and as a fund raiser for the scholarships. The passing of these two men brought additional emphasis to these efforts, in their memory.

Carroll Laxton, Club President during the '96 - '97 year, died in 1998. Well known, and respected in his chosen profession of pharmacist, Laxton is remembered through the Carroll Laxton Memorial Scholarships given each spring to three outstanding high school seniors.

That same golf tournament also contributes funds to the Robert N. Styres Memorial Scholarship at Caldwell Community College. One local student enrolled at CCC is awarded the scholarship. Styres, a Charter Member and Past President, served on the Lenoir and Caldwell County Boards of Education. He was active in numerous avenues to facilitate and foster education. A cartoonist of some local note, Styres contributed a cartoon to the club's weekly bulletin for years.

The Caldwell County Rotary Club has a strong history in support of the Paul Harris Fellowship program. One member, Jerry Kahill, had contributed funds to make his immediate family Paul Harris Fellows. A charter member and Past President from '85 - '86, Kahill expressed his support for RI by adding his wife, Sandra, and sons, Kerry and Michael, to the roles of Paul Harris Fellows.

A milestone meeting was held in December 2001 as Caldwell County Rotary Club marked the 1000th meeting in club history. A special evening was held at the Chetola in Blowing Rock to commemorate the occasion. Attendance of 100% was obtained, with spouses of most members attending. Several members participated in recollections of club history and activities.

Caldwell County Rotary Club turned 21 in June of 2003. Like many civic organizations, membership has slowly declined over a period of years. As preparations began to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Rotary International, a new spark of excitement began to embrace the club.

Strong leadership from Alan Caldwell, '03 - '03 President, helped lay the foundation for Caldwell County Rotary's resurgence in the historic 100th year. Under the leadership of President Bob Styres, Jr., club membership rose by 50% in the '04 - '05 year. Rotary's 100th anniversary was marked by the planting of a fellowship Tree and construction of a rest shelter in the Lenoir Walking Park. Commemorative bricks were sold to cover the expense of the project and to honor past and current Rotarians and other loved ones. An evening meeting during the 100th anniversary week was part of the celebration.

Seth Nagy led Caldwell County Rotary into its 23rd year. Club fellowship continued to be a paramount concern. The club has long been noted for the "fun" it has on Tuesday mornings as the "earliest meeting Rotary Club in the world". No other club starts a meeting earlier than 6:44am. Chris Biecker began a precedent setting two year stint as Club President. His term was marked by membership growth in both '06 - '07 and '07 - '08. His tenure also highlighted the 25th anniversary of the club's founding. Both years featured a joint project with Lenoir Rotary in the Cycle To Serve Bike race. The First Annual Costume Ball was held in February 2008 and proved to be a successful fund raiser. It will only get better in the years to come.

As the club enters into its 27th year, three members still have perfect attendance for all those years. Bruce Cannon, Jeff Joines, and Jerry Kahill, all past Presidents, have been able to maintain a perfect record of attendance. Incoming President Charles Beck brings new vitality to the leadership position of Caldwell County Rotary. Our members have contributed greatly to the betterment of our community. The past is only the prologue for what the future holds for our club and our community.