

For District Rotary Newsletter...

Report from District 9800's International RYLA Delegate and RYLA Co-director, Michelle Blanchard

Dear Rotarians,

I am writing to acknowledge those Rotarians who supported me to attend the 2006 International Rotary Youth Leadership Award (IRYLA) program in Helsingborg, Sweden and the Rotary International Convention in Copenhagen, Denmark and to let you know a bit about the experience. I am particularly grateful to the Rotary Clubs of Melbourne Latrobe and Brighton North as well as the District RYLA Committee for their financial support.

IRYLA took place from the 8-12 June and was attended by 120 young people, aged 18 to 30, from 26 countries. Without doubt the highlight of the trip was the time spent with the other participants. Where else do you have the opportunity to sit on a Swedish beach watching the sunset (at 11pm!) debating human rights law with an Italian lawyer!

One thing that struck me immediately was how diverse the RYLA programs are around the world - and this is both a strength and a challenge for RYLA internationally. For example, the programs in most Australian districts have a very similar philosophy in that they present a range of different ideas on leadership and encourage participants to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to develop a vision for their own lives and their community. These programs are informed by a strengths based approach and respond to some of the latest youth development research. However there are some programs, mainly those conducted in the southern states of America that take a much more prescriptive approach, in that the speakers are there to 'tell young people how to become leaders in the future...when they are old enough'

I was lucky enough to be one of a few RYLarians who spoke at the program's closing ceremony in front of the President Elect Nominee of Rotary International, Wilfred Wilkinson where I was able to talk about our RYLA philosophy and the experience of our district taking a youth-led approach. I'm really excited by the willingness of people within the International RYLA committee, RI Staff at Evanston and other program Directors to establish ongoing information sharing mechanisms regarding our programs and the approaches taken. At the conclusion to International RYLA, a group of about 30 of us stayed on to attend the opening ceremony of the RI Convention and a few of us, myself included, spent time looking after the RYLA booth in the House of Friendship. What an incredible opportunity to meet and learn from Rotarians around the world!

District 9800 has an awful lot to be proud of. There is no right or wrong way of conducting a RYLA program, but our District really is leading the way in terms of providing a program that gives young people the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills and encouraging personal development. This experience has reminded me of how much I value being able to work alongside a team of young people and diverse speakers who have helped to develop a RYLA program that respects each individual and their journey of self-discovery, encourages people to grow, challenge the ideas they are presented - both at RYLA and in life - to find values and vision that work for them.

It's said that 'empowerment is about letting go, so that others can get going' and attending IRYLA has highlighted the enormous trust that the Rotarians of this District have in Tim Cavanagh, myself and our team, empowering us to deliver this really special program. Your vision in this regard is unmatched.

The 2006 District 9800 RYLA Program will take place from the 2nd to 8th December and we're currently taking applications from young people to attend. Further information can be found at www.ryla9800.org.au

Michelle Blanchard
RYLA Co-director, District 9800