

by KIM LISAGOR

# WHAT MILLENNIALS LOVE ABOUT ROTARY



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CHRISTA PAPAVALIOU

If there is one absolute truth about millennials, it is this: Anyone who says there is an absolute truth about millennials risks being subjected to their collective eye roll.

Millennials are individuals, and fiercely so. According to the Pew Research Center, most of them don’t even like being called “millennials,” let alone hearing generalizations about their shared attitudes and behaviors.

Case in point: Christa Papavasiliou, 31, recoils at the notion that older folks see her generation as a bunch of selfie-snapping smartphone addicts. “I’m the complete opposite,” says Papavasiliou, who was a Boston Rotaract club president and district Rotaract representative before joining a Rotary club, the E-Club of New England, last year. “How would they like it if I stereotyped them?”

It’s a fair question. And yet, it seems we can’t help ourselves.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines millennials as Americans born between 1982 and 2000, which puts their overall numbers around 83.1 million. That

means there are more of them than any other age group – including baby boomers, who totaled 78.8 million at their peak and now number 75.4 million. As millennials become the dominant demographic in our communities, the rest of us strive to better understand them in order to improve our relationships in the workplace and beyond.

For Rotary, the millennial era could mean an influx of young, energetic members. The percentage of Rotarians under 40 has remained fairly steady at about 10 percent in recent years, but this could be the generation that bucks the trend.

The Pew Research Center has found that millennials do tend to share certain traits. A 2014 report characterized them as “unattached to organized politics and religion, linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, in no rush to marry – and optimistic about the future.” Millennials are also the most ethnically diverse age group and the first generation of digital natives. And, yes, more than half of them have shared a selfie.

They also feel compelled to make a difference in their communities. The Case Foundation’s 2015 Millennial Impact Research Report found that 84 percent of the millennials surveyed had made a charitable donation the previous year and that 70 percent had spent at least an hour volunteering.

What does that mean for Rotary? Papavasiliou may be reluctant to speak for her generation, but she nevertheless represents their drive to make an impact.

In college, she was drawn to Rotaract because of the service opportunities. The desire to serve is what carried her to International Rotary Youth Leadership Awards and got her “completely hooked” on Rotary. It’s what inspired her to charter a Rotaract club near her hometown and to join the Boston club when she moved. “There’s a real beauty to the underlying message of Service Above Self,” she says. “That’s how I acquire all of my friends in a new city. I know there are going to be people in Rotary who are like-minded and like-hearted.”

**O**ne such friend is 24-year-old Jermaine Ee, who became the youngest member of the Rotary Club of Los Angeles when he joined last August. Before joining "LA5," he was a Rotaract club president at the University of Southern California, where he also served as district representative. He and Papavasiliou met at a Rotary event.

"The truth is, Rotary has everything millennials want," Ee says. Among other things, it offers an opportunity to unplug every once in a while and connect with people who share their values, if not their age demographic, he says.

As a young professional who is surrounded by tech entrepreneurs, Ee is drawn to Rotary's in-person interactions and "old school" traditions. "People talk about the Friday lunches that take time out of my schedule," he says. "I love them. Among my peers, there is a lack of this formality."

He also appreciates the opportunity to develop relationships with people who have more life experience than he does.



**“The truth is, Rotary has everything millennials want.”**

JERMAINE EE

"My older Rotarian friends and mentors never fail to help me put things in perspective," he says. And their mentorship isn't just about business; they have helped him navigate some of adulthood's subtler skills: "drinking Scotch, planning a day at the racetrack, understanding how to place people on a seating chart."

In return, Ee likes to coach older Rotarians in mysteries such as how to use social media. As co-founder of a digital marketing agency, Ee bridges the generation gap at work every day. "I sell Snapchat to 60-year-old executives," he says. "It doesn't get more resistant than that."

He often tells his older clients that they are more skilled at social media than they think. "You know how to care about someone; you remember what they like to eat; you remember that their daughter had a ballet competition," he reminds them. "You care about things. You just don't know how to do it on a platform."

In contrast, he says, many younger people "know how to use the tools, but

they don't know how to do the relationship building."

Ee considers it his responsibility as a young Rotarian to help facilitate intergenerational conversations. His first pointer: It's not about your membership numbers. "We invest a lot in intent," he says of his peers. "So when a 60-something Rotarian talks to a 21-year-old, if that person's intent is to just get another line on the roster, that intent is seen really quickly."

He suggests that clubs encourage dialogue. "Millennials are curious," he says, "and Rotarians in general have a lot of interesting stories." It seems like a natural fit, but younger members can feel intimidated by the older adults in the room, and longtime members can get so comfortable in their social routines that they forget to mingle.

While Rotary may be a great ideological fit for millennials, it can present logistical challenges for young people who aren't settled enough in their professional and personal lives to commit to regular meeting attendance.



**“Millennials are looking for a place to give back to their community, but they need to feel like they are getting value as well.”**

YVONNE KWAN

**T**hat's the problem that the founders of the E-Club of Silicon Valley set out to solve when they established their club last year. "It was very much a conversation of how we can get people into Rotary who want to be a part of Rotary but always come up with the response of, 'I don't have the time,'" says 25-year-old charter member Yvonne Kwan. "These are people who want to do good. They want to help out. They want to give back to the community, but they just can't make it out to the meetings every single week at a certain time."

Kwan's club posts its meetings online for members to "attend" at any time during the week. The club also hosts regular social gatherings – potlucks, happy hours, and, most recently, a hike in a natural area north of San Francisco. "We went out into nature, and we took a few hours and hiked up to Point Reyes," she says. "It was beautiful."

When members go online for meetings, they find engaging content, Kwan says. "We've made our meetings very visual-

heavy with videos, pictures, a font that's easy to read."

In addition to the standard Rotary business items, the e-club meetings feature videos of speakers from all over the world and a weekly "tech tidbit or life hack" that members may find useful or entertaining. Kwan recently posted a tip about a discovery she made when she temporarily lost her Internet connection: The Chrome browser has a game hidden in its connection error page. "It was the highlight of my day for that very treacherous time when I had no Internet," she jokes. So she made a short video about it and shared it with the club.

Another difference between Kwan's club and others: "We don't have big service projects that we do as a club because we're dispersed throughout the world," she says. Instead, members are encouraged to partner with other Rotary clubs or nonprofit organizations, find their own opportunities, and report them to the club as service. "You can do your own service in your own

time," Kwan says. "It gives people more power to adjust their own schedules."

Though the e-club's meetings are online, Kwan considers the in-person interactions to be just as important. She usually invites potential members to a social event before they ever see an online meeting. "It draws them in and it piques their interest, and you get to know them a little bit more," she says. "I think that's really valuable. Millennials are looking for a place to give back to their community, but they need to feel like they are getting value as well."

Ee, of the Los Angeles club, agrees. "It doesn't matter how bad my week was. I always end it with Rotary, and I always leave with a little more good faith in humanity," he says. "I'm really excited for the next 20 years – to see where Rotary's going to go." ■

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