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Foundation alumnus inspires Rotary connections between North Carolina, Taiwan

By Maureen Vaught
Rotary International News

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Owen George is an entrepreneur, environmentalist, humanitarian, journalist, world traveler, and Rotarian. And he can trace all of these interests to his year abroad as a Rotary Foundation [Ambassadorial Scholar](#).

"The scholarship gave me something very special: confidence," says George, who studied at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1980-81. "I know I can travel anywhere in the world and meet new people."

Now, he's helping the next generation experience the program's rewards by serving as a Rotarian sponsor counselor. George was selected by his club – the Rotary Club of Asheboro, North Carolina, USA (RI District 7690) – to assist Ambassadorial Scholar Lily Kuo, an American student who will travel to Taiwan in July to study at Tunghai University.

For George, this role is another link in a chain of events connecting him with Taiwan and his Rotary club. Since 1991, George has been a frequent visitor to Taiwan, even spending two years teaching English as a second language in private schools and corporations. So when he joined the Asheboro club in 2004, he was pleased to learn that the district was planning a [Group Study Exchange](#) with District 3460 in Taiwan.

"Here is a place that I love like my second home. I speak the language. I thought to myself, Is it possible that I could be chosen as the district team leader?" he says.

Despite being relatively new to Rotary, George was selected to lead the four-member GSE team. They traveled to Taiwan

last year on a monthlong trip.

"Owen's ability to communicate with the Taiwanese really enhanced the experience for us," says GSE team member Gayle Taylor. "We were able to learn so much more about the culture."

Midway through the exchange, District 3460 Foundation Committee Chair John Wu contacted George with an unexpected offer. He wanted to donate US\$26,000 to the North Carolina district for an Ambassadorial Scholarship. His only request was that George help make it a success.

Past District Governor Phil Morris believes George's experience as a Rotary Scholar contributed to the scholarship offer. "And his fluency in Mandarin Chinese encouraged his GSE hosts to pursue this idea with him," Morris adds.

The Taiwanese district next proposed a Rotary Friendship Exchange between the two countries. In October, three Rotarians and two of their spouses from Taichung spent 10 days in Piedmont, North Carolina, as guests of District 7690. George says plans are now underway for a group from North Carolina to visit Taiwan.

"My experience as a scholar helped me gain the confidence of the district governor and Group Study Exchange selection committee, who chose me as a team leader," George says.

It was this confidence, combined with George's own, that sparked a chain of events that has led to a special bond between the two countries. And it all began when a young man boarded a plane to South America as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar.

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