

Every true Rotarian has a story to tell, a defining moment that captures what Rotary is all about. In the January 2004 Rotarian Magazine, Mr. Gustavo Giay, a Rotarian from Argentina, was featured and told his Rotary story.

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Rotary Story – Gustavo Giay

“I wanted to live in a better world, a world with solidarity, justice, peace and opportunities for all. I realized I had to team up with people who shared my goals and were willing to make them a reality.” - Gustavo Giay

Growing up in Arrecifes, Argentina, Gustavo Giay absorbed the spirit of service pervading his home. Often, he accompanied his accountant father, Luis Vicente Giay (RI President, 1996-97) – a dedicated Rotarian since age 22 – to his Rotary meetings. Oddly, the members’ fervent speeches mesmerized little Gustavo. “I loved their speeches about the problems in society they wanted to address,” recalls the 32-year-old attorney today. “Rotary, not school, made me conscious of these problems. We were not told these things in school with the same emphasis as you get in Rotary: *Let’s fix this problem! Let’s help these people!* I loved that passion; I don’t know why.”

Gustavo’s fondest childhood memories are sculpted in the service motif: assisting Luis in fundraisers for high school scholarships and needy children; helping his mother, Celia, prepare meals and decorate tables for community service events. Young Gustavo also enjoyed the exuberant clamor of his parents’ Rotary friends visiting constantly on “family” weekends. “My entire childhood, I watched all these people come into our home for dinner and pleasant talk and camaraderie. They were like another big family. This was the other side of the Rotary coin: while my parents were busy contributing to a better society, they were also gaining friendships for life.”

Gustavo recalls vividly his first introduction, at age seven, to Rotary in action. Luis brought him along on a special one-day campaign to raise operating funds for Escuela Especial No. 501, a local school for physically and emotionally handicapped children. Every year, Luis’ club (the Rotary Club of Arrecifes) partnered with private groups on the project they called “The Million Campaign” for its goal of one million pesos. And each year, Rotarians manned the same intersection, boldly halting drivers in traffic to pitch the cause and extend the “alcancia”, expectantly.

Excited, intrigued, Gustavo fought his brothers to hold the treasured box for his dad. A quarter-century later, the memory still stirs: “I remember myself very happy holding the “alcancia” as people put money in. It made me feel so helpful and important. And I have always remembered that feeling.”

At seven, Gustavo knew that Dad was always doing things for others – and most resolutely for children. But he didn’t fully grasp what this special fundraiser meant. His first seminal lesson came at 10 when Luis brought him and two of his brothers into the Escuela Especial to meet the children they helped each year. Gustavo was stunned; he had never met a disabled child before. Here were ruined children his own age, some struggling on inelegant crutches; others trapped emotionally in disorders he could not fathom. Many, he noted however, were thrilled to have visitors.

“It had an immediate impact,” says Gustavo, still moved today. “I remember wondering if they had someone to take care of them, like parents. When I learned that some had no one, I realized for the first time there were people much less fortunate than myself, and how lucky I was to be ‘normal.’” That experience lingered; at 14 Gustavo joined a Catholic church “to do something personally for the community, especially those handicapped kids.” Subsequently, he and fellow volunteers visited the school each week to play games with the kids, talk and laugh, and “give them the attention they craved.” Today, some of those kids remain his close friends.

In high-school, Gustavo learned the second seminal lesson in his Rotary education. He and some pals performed weekly on the school’s own radio program, dispensing juvenile jokes and trivial tales of school events. Then one of them mentioned a good cause they could champion – a local foster home that needed funds to build an extra room – and the group decided to use their radio forum “to do some good for the community.” What happened next changed Gustavo’s life.

His group decided to raise money for the new room. But, concerned that the traditional street method annoyed too many people, they created a daring new approach. Gustavo recalls: “We announced on our program that we were raising funds for a worthy community service, but that we would not request anyone’s cooperation. Instead, we would ride bikes with red flags through the city’s neighborhoods at pre-announced times, and if anyone wanted to contribute they had to stop us. Or they could phone the station and we would come pick up the money.”

So all next day, 40 impassioned students on red-flagged bikes toured every neighborhood for 30 minutes. More people than expected literally flagged them down to donate; and the station fielded calls all day. On one that Gustavo answered himself, an elderly voice pleaded: “Send someone to my house.” He grabbed a contribution box and rode into the poorest neighborhood he’d ever seen. When he found the address, he worried: *How can these people contribute?* – but rang the bell anyway.

A young lady opened the door, studying Gustavo’s bike and flag. Then she said, “Oh yes. We were waiting for you. My mother is in the bedroom. Please go in.” Gustavo entered the bedroom to find a frail, 85-year-old woman ill in bed. “She had a *moneda*, a fifty-cent coin, and she put it in the savings box. She said, ‘I know I will die. But these children will have a better life if I do this.’ I was very grateful; I had tears in my heart. I said she would be fine and the children would appreciate this very much.”

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The goal was 3,000 pesos, but they raised 4,500, enough to build half the room. "That was a great success to us," Gustavo says proudly. "It showed that even if people are not requested, they will give anyway. I also learned that more people cared about helping others than I thought." Though yet a teen, he began pondering his destiny in life. "I wanted to live in a better world. A world with solidarity, justice, peace, and opportunities for all. I realized I had to team up with people who shared my goals and were willing to make them a reality."

Thus, Gustavo joined *Interact*, becoming president at 17. *Interact*, he says, not only helped him make friends but, most importantly, to develop his personal skills. He recalls standing with the mayor requesting permission to block off streets for a fundraiser. "I had to convince him that although we were teenagers, we truly wanted to do good for the community. I also had to lead 40 young people and channel their energy for a common cause. How many people have the opportunity to lead people at that age? That's what *Interact* gave me."

Gustavo sensed he was on the right path. In fact, his enthusiasm "to become useful to society" was so compelling, he joined the *Arrecifes* Fire Department as a volunteer firefighter. After four years training, he helped fight fires across the city. The firefighting impulse, he claims, was part of his instinctive drive to save others. "When I was a kid and the big alarms sounded for an emergency, I wondered where my parents and brothers were. I was scared they might be suffering in an accident. So I always ran to the fire station to ask what happened. One day, I thought: *If I come every time the alarm sounds, I should do something myself, to be sure my family is safe.*"

It was then, he believes, that the confluence of *Interact* and firefighting "closed the circle of my life and I sensed my destiny. I realized: *I belong where the need is.*"

At 18, Gustavo's parents took him to the RI convention in Seoul, Korea. It impressed him that so many different people from varied cultures were pursuing the same goals. Then an encounter that expressed, he says, "the internationality of Rotary" he'd never known before. "After the convention, we were walking in Tokyo when a Japanese man noticed my father's Rotary pin and stopped us. He said, in English, 'You're a Rotarian!' My father said, 'Yes. Are you a Rotarian?' 'Yes!' They shook hands and the man said, 'Do you have some time? I want to invite you for lunch at my place.' My father said 'Let's go' and he took us to his restaurant. His wife joined us, and for two hours this man treated my parents like old friends. To me then, it was the most impressive sign of international friendship I ever experienced. All because my father was a Rotarian! I never forgot that."

Shortly, Gustavo moved to Buenos Aires to attend the School of Law at the University of Buenos Aires. After earning his law degree, he returned home briefly and finally joined Rotary. Upon returning to Buenos Aires to work in intellectual property law for *Marval, O'Farrell & Mairal* – (he recently became a full partner)– Gustavo formed a 20-member New Generations Rotary club, *Costanera Norte Nuevas Generaciones* (President, 2002-03). Two years later came another defining moment in his service career.

A club member discovered "a huge need" in a poor neighborhood outside Buenos Aires, so the club investigated. Recounts Gustavo: "It was the poorest village imaginable: no jobs; ramshackle shacks with almost no electricity or fresh water; *villa miseria* ("wretched town"): the poorest of the poor. There was a small community house called *Casa del Anciano* (house of the elders), with minimum facilities, where elderly people gathered every day for a free, meager lunch. The caretakers cooked something called *olla popular* (common stew), a mixture of liquid and rice for people who cannot afford food. But we saw them cook this awful 'soup' in an oil drum over an open fire. It wasn't healthy. It wasn't even food!

"It reminded me forcefully how blessed I am in life. I felt obliged to help, and to keep helping everyone I can. Because as long as people lived like that, it wasn't the world I wanted to live in. It is impossible to eliminate all injustice in life, but if I always help someone else, at least I will feel at peace with myself."

Gustavo's club organized fundraisers and applied for a matching grant for the \$3,000 they need to refurbish the house and modernize the kitchen. While awaiting the funds, the club sends food every month and helps cook it properly. It's all they can do for now.

Gustavo ruminates now, for the first time, on the value of his Rotary journey. "Rotary dignifies me. And it reminds me that dignity lies more in serving than being served; that generosity knows no boundaries. It also gives me the opportunity to work for a better world. And I know I'm not alone; there's at least 1.2 million people doing the same. Rotary gives the needy a chance for a better life – that's the main reason I will be a Rotarian all my life. I just hope we help many more young people to feel the same way."

Meet Gustavo Giay

Age: 32

Home: Buenos Aires Argentina

Occupation: Intellectual property attorney

Family: Son of Luis Vicente and Celia Giay

Rotary History: Became a Rotarian at age 26 and a charter member of the Rotary Club of Costanera Norte – Nuevas Generaciones in 2001

Rotary offices held:

Club President, 2002-2003

Member 2003-2004 Membership Development and Retention Comité

Member 2003-2004 RI New Generations Subcommittee