

# MADAM PRESIDENT

An unassuming school principal made history as the first woman to lead a Rotary club.

by Julie A. Jacob

**O**N THE MORNING OF 4 MAY 1987, SYLVIA WHITLOCK WAS DRIVING ALONG THE FREEWAY TO HER JOB AS AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL WHEN SHE HEARD THE NEWS ON THE RADIO. THE U.S. SUPREME COURT

had just issued a ruling that, in essence, meant that women could join U.S. Rotary clubs. "I was so excited, I could hardly wait to get to school," recalls Whitlock, who was then president-elect of what the locals called the "ex-Rotary Club of Duarte," the small California club that lost its charter in 1978 for admitting women. "When I got to school, all the cameras were there. They interviewed us for four hours."

The Supreme Court's decision made the evening news and the front page of area newspapers. Two months later, when Whitlock was sworn in as the reinstated club's president, she made Rotary and U.S. history by becoming the first woman president of a Rotary club.

Whitlock says she didn't join Rotary to be a trailblazer. She simply

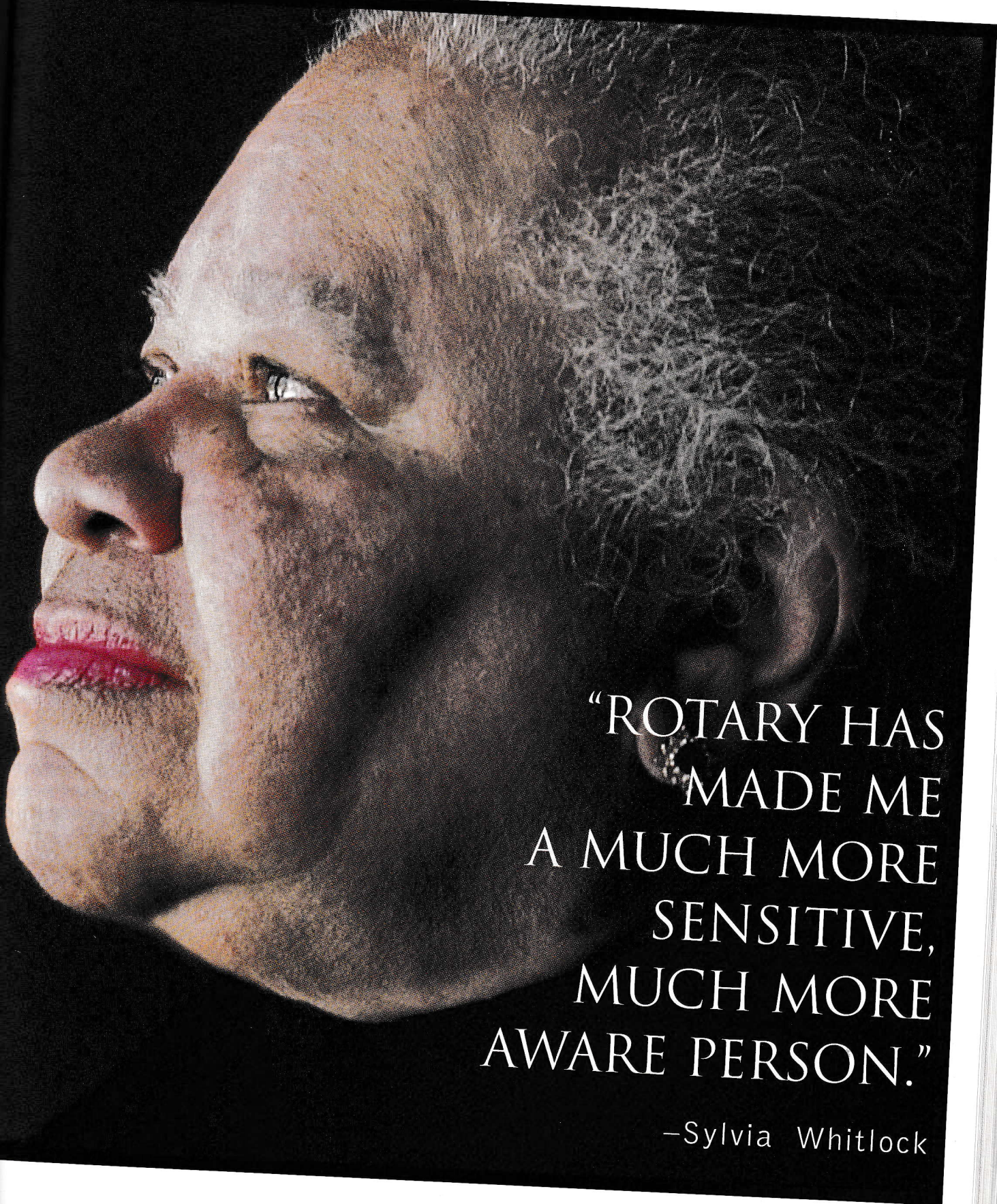
wanted to serve. Helping others is a value that Whitlock, born in New York City and raised in Jamaica, absorbed in childhood. Her mother was her role model. "She was always doing things for neighbors and children. As a pediatric nurse, she influenced a lot of families," she recalls. "My grandmother before her also set that example for me when I was a child, and I can vividly remember instances where she responded to the needs of neighbors around her."

After high school, Whitlock returned to New York, where she earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Hunter College. Following the birth of her son, she and her husband, a production manager for NBC television, moved to Pomona, Calif., where the mild climate reminded her of Jamaica.

In the years that followed, Whitlock gave birth to another son and a daughter, earned graduate and doctoral degrees in education, and became a school administrator in nearby Duarte, an ethnically diverse town of 20,000 nestled at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains, 20 miles northeast of Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, the Rotary Club of Duarte was undergoing changes and growth of its own. In 1976, the club invited three women — two school principals and a psychologist — to join, a violation of RI policy at the time. The club's charter was revoked in 1978, and a lawsuit was filed. The case made its way through the legal system until the Supreme Court decided the matter. In 1989, the RI Council on Legislation voted to open club membership to women worldwide.





“ROTARY HAS  
MADE ME  
A MUCH MORE  
SENSITIVE,  
MUCH MORE  
AWARE PERSON.”

—Sylvia Whitlock



Whitlock accepted an invitation to join the Duarte club in 1982, even though her schedule was tight (she was now a widow raising three children and working full-time). "I had never been involved in a service club before," Whitlock says. "But it was a great opportunity to get involved. I just really jumped at the chance."

Whitlock says she did not aspire to be club president, but she notes that in a small club almost everyone gets a

under constant observation by Rotarians from all over.

Of the club's many projects during her year as president, Whitlock says the highlight was its work with an orphanage in Tecate, Mexico. The club donated money and supplies and arranged for a physician and dentist to travel there to provide care. The club also helped establish a music program in Duarte's schools and became very active in The Rotary

was better at meetings since women joined. Whitlock's response: "No, because women didn't join to do the cooking."

One enjoyable moment that year occurred when she was on vacation in London and made up a meeting at a local club, where the member toasted both her and the queen. Wherever she made up a meeting that year, she says, she was asked to speak about her experiences.

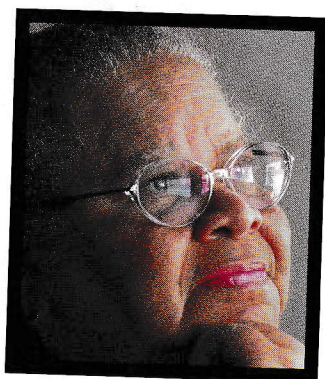
Her children were also supportive, she says, although as teenagers they didn't see what all the fuss was about. "I'm not sure they understood the significance of what was happening then, but now they do," says Whitlock. "I was still just their mom." They are now Paul Harris Fellows, and she sees them as promising future Rotarians.

Asked how women have changed Rotary over the past 17 years, Whitlock says that clubs surely have benefited from the organizational skills and attention to detail that many women possess, in addition to their overall contributions as committed Rotarians, gender notwithstanding. "Just the face of Rotary changed" with the addition of women, she says, "but Rotary's commitment to service has not changed, and that's why we join, because we want to serve."

Whitlock says that Rotary changed her, however. Her involvement has made her much more aware of the interconnectedness of people around the world. "I gained a greater awareness of how small our world really is and what our needs really are," she explains. "I may have picked up a newspaper and read about a situation, but I probably would have never become involved. Rotary has made me a much more sensitive, much more aware person."

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## "THAT'S WHY WE JOIN, BECAUSE WE WANT TO SERVE." — Sylvia Whitlock



WHITLOCK

chance at the office sooner or later. Her turn just happened to occur during that landmark year.

"It was just coincidence that the Supreme Court decision came during my presidential year," she says. "I did not start the action; there were three other women who were there from the beginning."

Although Whitlock didn't join Rotary to be a pioneer, her experience at a presidents-elect training seminar (PETS) in February 1987 made her realize just how important it was for women to have the opportunity to serve. Up until that point, she hadn't fully understood the scope of Rotary's humanitarian and educational programs worldwide. "I became even more determined that this was where women needed to be," she says. Even though she was the lone woman among 300 men at the PETS, she remembers her male colleagues treating her with nothing but warmth and cordiality.

When Whitlock began her term as president, she says she put pressure on herself to run the club as efficiently and effectively as possible, especially since it had become a popular make-up club and thus was

Foundation's Ambassadorial Scholarships program.

Although the club worked to recruit new members, gender was not a major factor, Whitlock says. The club now has about 20 members, half of them women.

Janet Manrique, the club's current president, describes Whitlock as a "quiet, effective leader" with a deep vein of compassion and a knack for delegating responsibilities and getting others involved.

"The word that just comes immediately to mind is *humanist*. Sylvia has a strong commitment to people," says Manrique, also a school administrator. "When she sees an injustice or suffering, she wants to help. Sylvia is also a mentor. She is always supportive and looking for ways to promote people in the organization or give young people opportunities for growth through programs like Youth Exchange and Ambassadorial Scholars."

Whitlock says that during her term as president, both Rotarians and non-Rotarians, with very few exceptions, were overwhelmingly supportive. Somewhat annoying, however, were the silly questions from reporters, one of whom actually asked if the food



## In memoriam

**W**ith deep regret, we report the deaths of the following Rotarians who served RI as district governors:

**Grady Halbert**, Crowell, Texas, USA, 1953-54; **Melvin R. Dunn**, Booneville, Ark., USA, 1960-61; **Charles L. Penfield**, Hollis-Brookline, N.H., USA, 1975-76; **Wendell Rovelstad**, Elgin, Ill., USA, 1975-76; **Jong Duk Lee**, Pusan-North, Korea, 1977-78; **Clarence Howard Hagmeier**, Portland, Ore., USA, 1983-84; **Eric Nicholson**, The Deepings, England, 1983-84; **Roberto P. Hahn**, Guayaquil Norte, Ecuador, 1987-88; **Luis Eduardo Toledo**, Santa Rosa, Argentina, 1995-96; **Higinio J. Truppi**, La Plata, Argentina, 2000-01.

## Madam president

*[continued from page 30]*

Whitlock has remained very active in Rotary at the grassroots level. At the request of her fellow Rotarians, she served a second term as president in 2001-02, the club's 50th anniversary. The highlights of her second term, she says, were funding an AIDS clinic in Jamaica and helping two small communities in Nigeria build water wells. She has also served as an assistant governor and has chaired the club's Four-Way Test speech competition and its Ambassadorial Scholarships committee.

Whitlock retired from the school district and launched a second career as a psychotherapist about 10 years ago. The same values that drew her to Rotary piqued her interest in psychotherapy, she says, because her practice gives her the opportunity to help people in need or in pain. She also indulges her passion for international travel, and wherever she goes, she witnesses Rotary's impact.

"Rotary is the greatest service organization," Whitlock says firmly. "When I look at programs like PolioPlus and all the humanitarian projects, it makes me proud to be a Rotarian." ■

*Julie A. Jacob is a freelance writer based in Chicago. She is a former Group Study Exchange team member.*

## Rotary story

*[continued from page 18]*

a slit window Cattrall watched the North Tower crumble.


She and Bowers finally made it to the Staten Island ferry. Businessmen sat in shock. Many had what Cattrall's domestic partner, Don Navor, a Vietnam War veteran, later described as "the thousand-yard stare." In fact, when Navor finally reached Cattrall by cell phone, he drew on his wartime experience to offer advice: Save yourself; keep moving; find food and water. "He was telling me: You're in a war zone," she says.

That night, at Bowers' home in Princeton, N.J., they made calls, watched news reports on television, and tried to relax with a good meal and a bottle of wine. Later, alone in the guest room, Cattrall was struck by the stark silence: no screams, sirens, or planes – just crickets chirping outside. "That calm was the most soothing reassurance that all was still right with the world," she says.

Two days later, when Cattrall finally got back to Rochester, she was greeted by American flags hanging out every window of her home, little flags lining the walk, and red-white-and-blue bunting draping the fence. On her lawn were 75 of her fellow Rotarians, waving flags and singing. All she could think was: These people are like my family.


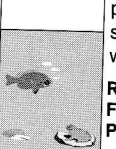
"In Rotary," she says, still moved by the memory, "we always talk about giving more than we get. But that one gesture of giving changed me. All those people singing to me was like one loud voice saying, 'We love you, Kathleen!' It brought to mind something I learned in church as a child – that we ourselves are not the light, but that it is our responsibility to reflect the light and let it shine through us. At that moment, I realized that God gave me the power, the will, the energy, and the passion to reflect the light of Rotary. And I've been doing that every day since." ■

*Alan Steinberg profiled Gustavo Gay in the January issue of THE ROTARIAN.*



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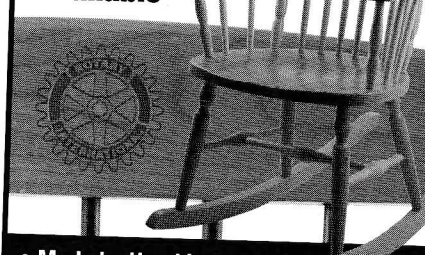
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