

TRIBUTE TO PRESIDENT ROLF J.V. KLÄRICH

Rolf J.V. Klärich, the 70th President of Rotary International, died on January 21, 2005 in Helsinki, Finland. Rolle, as he was known in Rotary, is survived by his loving wife Kathy, three daughters, and one much-loved grandson. But he left all of us a great legacy of courageous service in the face of daunting odds, for his life showed the admirable triumph of man over tragedy.



Rolle was born in Oulu, in northern Finland, where his father ran a candy factory. He was the youngest of four children, and he had a happy and carefree childhood, with much fondness for ski-jumping and other athletic sports. Then, when he was barely seventeen years old, life and the whole world changed for Rolle. It was 1939; war broke out between Russia and Finland; then Rolle quickly enlisted and went to war in defense of country. He did not even bother to get his parents' consent.

He came out of the conflict with a pitifully broken body that years of surgery and treatment could not properly put together again. He was finally able to walk with the aid of two canes, but, he said, he never knew a day without pain since then. He in fact endured a succession of surgeries even in the last two years of his life to stem his worsening aches.

Disability and life-long pain did not deter Rolle from struggling to recapture his place in life. Firm and stubborn determination, persistent effort, and a refusal to give up – that Finnish virtue called “sisu” – enabled him to conquer his disability. He went through college and joined his father's business. In time, he took it over and built it up to the point that he became consultant to the food manufacturing industry of Finland. He married lovely Kathy, whom he had met in college, and whose quiet and gentle ways happily complemented his assertive bent. With her, he was blessed with three daughters, all of whom – surely for love of him – went into professions that help the handicapped and the suffering. He joined Rotary in 1953, served it twice as district governor, as vice-president, and then as President in 1980-81.

Friends remember Rolle for his sense of humor, his mock severity of manner and his bent for serious discussions on a range of matters. But he was more of a doer than a talker. He served many worthy causes other than Rotary and received recognitions from them, such as the Finnish Cross of Liberty, a gold medal from the Fraternal Order of Disabled War Veterans, and even a gold badge of merit from the Finnish Football Association. He treasured the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.), which he received for his long and valuable service as consul of Great Britain in Oulu.

Rolle's presidency excited Rotarians to ease the plight of the disabled. They were thus better prepared to focus on the needs of polio victims when PolioPlus came. But, even after his presidency, Rolle rendered valuable service as liaison of the board with some German governors who at one time felt they had some cause for dissatisfaction in their arrangements. And then, under authority from President Hugh Archer, he negotiated and obtained the organization of Rotary in Russia, his former enemy!

The most remarkable thing about Rolle's presidency was his adoption of a theme that totally disregarded his own infirmity and challenged those of us who are not disabled. Although he had to struggle mightily just to get into his car, and navigating across a room took him a painfully long time, President Rolle left us the appeal: TAKE TIME TO SERVE.

Time is the most valuable commodity in the world, for it measures the length of our life on earth. Rolle asked us who value our life to invest a part of it to make life worth living for others. If we all take time to serve, perhaps Rotary can truly bring hope that can dampen anger in unexpected places and bring us nearer to the world peace that we all crave. Then we can thank Rolle for service beyond the grave.

By M.A.T. CAPARAS
PRIVP, 1980-81, RI President 1986-87

