

History of the New Members Committee aka “College of Rotary Knowledge”

by Suzanne S. Barnhill

Members of the New Members Committee may wonder about the nomenclature of the class. The term “New Members Committee” was selected by **PDG Tom Scoggins** when he was asked by club president **Mac Walcott** to form the class in 1993.

When Tom joined the club in 1992, he brought with him the experience of 35 years of membership in four Rotary clubs (Shreveport, LA 1950–53; Louisville, KY 1953–1954; Houston, TX 1955–1956; and Washington, DC 1965–1992) and of serving as president of the Washington club (1975–76) and as district governor (1977–78). Certainly Tom was well qualified to teach a class for new members. But he also understood the truth of the words of Confucius: “**I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.**” He knew that a lecture or even lecture/discussion model for the class would not work. Instead, he structured it as a committee, composed of participants rather than pupils; the idea was that the committee members would work together to share what they knew or had learned, and the chairman would be a moderator rather than an instructor.

The words of invitation have not changed over the years: “President So-and-So has appointed us members of the New Members Committee of the Rotary Club of Fairhope and has asked me to serve as chairman.” Members of that first New Members Committee included **Owen Bailey**, **Cecile Godfrey**, **Xavier Hartmann**, **B. G. Hinds**, **Jim Reid**, and **Harry Sherman**. Not only had Harry been a Rotarian since 1973, but the class also included **Denis Inkel**, another Past District Governor. So there was a wealth of experience to draw on. At that point, the syllabus was still taking shape, and it continued to develop over the next few classes.

Each uniquely composed committee has its own dynamic, and members usually develop a camaraderie that lasts beyond the five weeks or nine weeks or five months of the class (meeting intervals have varied through the years). A member of NMC #4, when asked if she knew a certain member of the club, said, “Of course! He was in my pledge class.” Although many clubs have some form of new member orientation, the structure of Fairhope’s New Members Committee is unusual if not unique. Tom was always glad to share his experience with other clubs, and at least two other clubs in our district (Robertsdale and Daphne/Spanish Fort) have sent members to attend the class with a view to replicating it.

I was privileged to participate in New Members Committee #2 in 1994 and have assisted the chairmen in some of the clerical aspects of subsequent committees. Even with clerical help, though, chairing the “committee” is not an easy task, and after ten years in the post, at the end of NMC #12, Tom stepped down from the position of Membership Development chairman (which had included the job of new member recruitment as well as training). **Larry Green** took over as chairman of NMC #13 in 2002 and served through NMC #17, at which point the current chairman, **Dick Charles**, took over with NMC #18 in 2006 and thoroughly revised the syllabus to meet present needs. In 2014, Dick retired as Professor Emeritus, and **Gary Moore** assumed leadership of the group, beginning with NMC #29.

It was Dick, I think, who gave the class the jocular name of “College of Rotary Knowledge.” Each chairman has shaped the committee in his own way, though much of it remains as Tom envisioned it at the outset. Some of the changes have been mandated by revisions in the Rotary literature available: the seven-volume *Rotary Basic Library* was reduced to three volumes and then discontinued, forcing the class to switch to *The ABCs of Rotary*; on the other hand, the wealth of information available at the Rotary International website makes it easy for class members to access up-to-date information. But one of the chief purposes of the class has always been not only to introduce new members to Rotary basic knowledge, but also to help them get to know each other and the other members of the club, fulfilling the first part of the Object of Rotary: “the development of acquaintance as an opportunity for service.”