What if Kiwanis didn't exist?
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ASSISTANT EDITORS Curtis Billue, Julie Saetre
ART DIRECTOR Andy Austin
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR Tony Knoderer

KIWANIS INTERNATIONAL OFFICE
3636 Woodview Trace, Indianapolis, IN 46268-3196
800-459-4446 (toll-free in USA/Canada), 317-875-8755
Fax: 317-879-0204
Email: magazine@kiwanis.org
Website: kiwanis.org
Magazine website: kiwanismagazine.org

ADVERTISING SALES
3636 Woodview Trace, Indianapolis, IN 46268
317-217-6170, Fax: 317-217-6570
Email: advertise@kiwanis.org

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What if Kiwanis didn’t exist?

IN A WORLD WITHOUT KIWANIS, KIDS WOULD SUFFER MOST.
STORY BY KASEY JACKSON

Veronica and her children likely would not have a warm meal every day if it weren’t for the Kiwanis Club of Sisters, Oregon. Her husband has left. She has no income. She can’t make the house payments. She has found a job, but it’s far away and pays little—hardly enough to feed her and her children, ages 8 and 2.

Veronica relies heavily on the food she receives from the food bank that’s owned and operated by the Kiwanis Club of Sisters. The food bank provides basic staples to more than 200 people per month, and it has for the past 25 years.

Now, imagine: What if that food bank weren’t there? What would Veronica and her children—and all the others who turn to the food bank—do? What if the food bank weren’t there because the Sisters Kiwanis Club didn’t exist?

That’s hundreds of hungry people in Sisters, Oregon—and no Kiwanis to help.

Veronica’s family relies on Kiwanis. It’s not much of an exaggeration to say there are months when they rely on Kiwanis to survive. And they aren’t alone. Countless families around the world turn to Kiwanis—and other service organizations like Kiwanis—to make ends meet, to put
food on the table, for medical support, for scholarship funding, for leadership training and for school supplies. There are also countless families who rely on Kiwanis-funded sports fields, playgrounds, schools and after-school programs. The list goes on and on.

But take Kiwanis out of the equation and Veronica and her family are left hungry. Who will help them? Who will build the playgrounds? Award the scholarships? Provide after-school programs? Who will stock the food pantries?

It’s a simple math equation balancing community needs and the human and financial resources needed to fulfill them. And in many communities, Kiwanis is the solution. That means Kiwanis’ strength in membership numbers is directly tied to Kiwanis’ ability to make a difference through service.

But here’s where the math gets troubling: Since about 1992, Kiwanis has steadily lost an average of 2 to 3 percent of members each year. In most clubs, it’s a member here and a member there. That’s not to say Kiwanis isn’t attracting new members. In fact, each year, more than 30,000 people join Kiwanis around the world. It’s just not enough to fill the gap left by those who leave Kiwanis or pass away.

“Getting new members is only part of the battle,” says Stan Soderstrom, executive director of Kiwanis International. “Keeping the members we have now is by and large the biggest challenge. Statistics show most people are not ‘lifers,’ meaning they aren’t going to remain active in their Kiwanis club until they die. We are seeing that most members remain in Kiwanis for about five or six years. To stay afloat, we need to not only gain members—we need to keep the ones we have as long as we can.”

So the question becomes: Do we have enough members to continue serving our communities?

In order to continue providing the service that members have delivered in communities for more than 100 years, Kiwanis must strengthen its membership. Kiwanis must stop losing members. Whether we craft our statement to say, “We have a problem” or “Folks, we’re in a bit of a pickle,” the meaning is the same. We must do something or Kiwanis could disappear.

WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER
But there is hope. Kiwanis members have made it their calling to rally and help those who need it most. So it’s probably safe to say that most Kiwanis members aren’t ready to allow Kiwanis to disappear into the history books. And it’s important to note that while Kiwanis’ membership numbers might be troubling, we are not alone. Many member organizations are experiencing similar trends in membership and are working hard to identify why this is happening, find new models for attracting members and, most important, create new models to thrive in community service.

So why is Kiwanis losing members? There could be many reasons. Priorities change. People just don’t have time anymore. As the older generations age and leave or members pass away, clubs aren’t filling these holes with vibrant, younger members. And lately, it’s been easier to get hundreds of thousands of people to capture video of themselves dumping ice water over their heads in the name of charity than it is to get someone to pay a membership fee to join an international service organization. People are hungry to give back and help—but the traditional ways of doing so just might not be top-of-mind for most people. Text to donate to a cause? Sure, that’s easy. Commit to attending Kiwanis meetings, fundraisers, social events and service projects for at least a year? Not as easy.

A simple search online yields numerous articles about service club membership organizations...
"For associations like Rotary and Kiwanis, member engagement demands a deeper recognition of market forces and consumer behavior. It requires a more personal, experiential view of our members' needs and to better define, understand and deliver what our members truly value."

Brian King
director of membership development, Rotary International
"When Stars of Tomorrow doesn't happen next year and Kids' Day Races aren't held at the Park County Fair, kids in Powell will certainly notice. We're saddened that local youth will also feel the Kiwanis club's absence in other ways."

Tessa Baker
Excerpt from an editorial dated October 18, 2016, published in the Powell (Wyoming) Tribune
and their membership woes. One article, published by The New York Times in 1992, proves that concerns about declining membership are nothing new. The reasons for the declining membership, however, may be changing. According to that article, at the time “the most frequently cited reason for the service clubs’ decline (was) ... the economy.” The article, which focuses primarily on U.S. membership numbers, goes on to state that during a recession, people are more likely to worry about their jobs than they are about their Kiwanis (or other service club) meeting. Other reasons for declining numbers included many of the reasons we still state today: Family time is a priority and increased mobility means fewer people have ties to their community.

Fast forward to today, and the conversations around water coolers at Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions are similar: What are the numbers? Where are we growing? Where can we do better?

A LOOK AT THE TRENDS

While it’s true that Kiwanis’ overall membership number is decreasing, that’s not the entire story. For instance, Kiwanis is seeing impressive growth in areas such as Taiwan and the Philippines, even while it struggles to keep or add new members at the same rate in North America. This is the case at Rotary International as well.

According to Brian King, director of membership development at Rotary International, membership in Rotary also varies by geographical location—sometimes quite dramatically.

“While membership in North America has been stagnant in recent years—and in some areas, in decline—Rotary in other parts of the world is growing at an extraordinary rate,” he says.

This information falls directly in line with statistics released by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. According to research for the year ending September 2015, the U.S. volunteer rate declined by 0.4 percentage points to 24.9 percent. That’s about 62.6 million volunteers in the United States who volunteered through or for an organization at least once between September 2014 and September 2015—which is only 25 percent of the adult population in the United States.

For those numbers to mean anything, the average member needs to not only recognize the trend, but also to understand its impact on the organization. That seemingly innocuous, slow membership loss multiplies over time in the thousands of clubs that make up Kiwanis International. Take the once-healthy club that loses one or two members a year, then multiply it by three decades. Then multiply that by 6,000-plus clubs.

“The average Joe or Jane Kiwanian doesn’t necessarily know the structure of Kiwanis International as a whole,” says Soderstrom. “This is not a surprise because most clubs are primarily focused on helping their own community. It’s not to say the bigger picture isn’t important to them. It’s just that they are so focused locally that they don’t have to think globally. And local affects global when it comes to membership numbers. Individual club membership really does affect the entire organization.”

WHY WE DO IT

In the Flanders region of Belgium, at least 800 children rely on the Kiwanis White Ravens project. The Kiwanis Club of Waasland Sint-Niklaas spearheads the

GLOBALLY, MORE THAN 42 million infants and young children (up to age 5) ARE OVERWEIGHT OR OBSE

World Health Organization

MORE THAN 780 million people lack adequate access to clean drinking water

The Water Project
White Ravens project to alleviate the effects of poverty on child development.

Chris van de Sande is one of the Kiwanians working diligently with schools and teachers to detect which students are most at risk of child poverty. Once the students are identified, the “White Ravens,” a group of about 55 teachers and volunteers, receive funds to spend on the children throughout the school year for any need that arises. Those needs have primarily been nourishment, school supplies/educational materials and clothing. The most basic of needs for a child to succeed.

Since the White Ravens project began, at least 800 children have been directly helped with new clothing, food, educational materials, footwear and more. According to figures released by the Kiwanis club, more than 12 percent of Flemish children live in a household with an income below the regional Flemish poverty-risk threshold.

If Kiwanis didn’t exist, who would help these children? Who would step up to put clothing on their backs, shoes on their feet? What would happen to those children and what would their futures look like?

Bud Romberg understands what it’s like to worry about families going without help from Kiwanis. His club, the Kiwanis Club of Steamboat Springs, Colorado, recently announced it would relinquish its charter after 68 years of service.

The club was known for its hands-on service, with at least one project a month and several ongoing projects. Club members point to an aging membership and lack of interest from younger residents as the reason for the club’s demise. If there’s a positive side to this, Romberg says, it’s that the club “will live on in the hearts and minds of those whose lives were affected by our club.”

Romberg is happy to report that scholarships awarded annually by the Steamboat Springs Kiwanis Club also will live on.

“We plan US$4,000 per year split between high school scholarships and preschool scholarships,” Romberg says. “We anticipate our funds lasting at least 10 years.”

Meaning the Steamboat Springs Kiwanis Club will keep helping children for almost a
decade after it closes its doors. Romberg says he’ll “miss meeting and working with other members.” And he’s not the only one who will notice this Kiwanis club’s absence.

“I’ve gotten two notes from community members,” he says. “One from a woman who has been involved for many years with situations involving seniors, indicating how instrumental Kiwanis was in getting senior programs started in our community. And I got one from a prominent local businessman indicating that Kiwanis has been an important functioning part of the community for all of his life in town—and he was born here.”

It’s not easy or comfortable to imagine a community losing a Kiwanis club. But for many communities around the world, it’s reality.

“I shudder to think of what our world would be like without Kiwanis,” says Kiwanis International President Jane Erickson. “We would have kiddos without food to eat, or places to sleep, or the immunizations they need to survive and then thrive. We would have kiddos without books, without bike helmets and without caring adults to let them know they matter in the world. There would be young emerging leaders without the role models they need to grow in courage, character, caring and commitment. There would be a world without the special language of Kiwanis, the language of love for others. Wow, what a sad world that would be.”

The Steamboat Springs, Colorado, Kiwanis Club disbanded after 68 years.

"We just have been getting too much gray hair for too long. We needed younger people, and they didn’t seem to be interested or have the time to join us."

Bud Romberg
Kiwanis Club of Steamboat Springs
Source: Craig Daily Press
SHARING OUR STORY
The reality of Kiwanis’ membership trends should serve as a wake-up call. A world without Kiwanis is a terrible thing to imagine. But just as there is hope for Kiwanis’ future and the good work yet to come, there is good news. The good news is that all of this imagining of how the world would be without Kiwanis is just that—imagination.

“We aren’t finished,” says President Erickson. “We are still here. We still have work to do and we’re going to pull on our boots and hit the ground running like we always do. And the better news is that we have proven ways to get back on track with our membership, to gain more strong, capable, willing people with love in their hearts who want to give back to their communities and their neighbors. The good news is we can act. The good news is we already know how to get more people involved—we get them excited. Then we ask them to join us.”

Tommy Ewart is no stranger to the excitement that comes from being involved, being active and helping others. He’s the CEO of a furniture company. He’s a devoted husband and a new father. He’s young. And he’s a member of the Kiwanis Club of Florence Pee-Dee, South Carolina. He finds time for Kiwanis because he’s made it a priority. And not only does he find time for Kiwanis himself, he is out in the community “selling” Kiwanis to others, preaching its successes, asking people to join. And it’s working. When he joined, the club had about 30 active members. Today, it has more than 50—and it’s still growing.

This all works for Ewart because he has a powerful, positive Kiwanis story.

“My father was a Kiwanian and past president in the town I grew up in (Sumter, South Carolina),” he says. “I remember helping with pancake breakfasts and ringing the bell at Christmas for the Salvation Army as a young boy. My family got to go to the international convention in Louisiana as well. His influence not only as my father, but what he does giving back to his community, set a wonderful example for me. My banker (who works with my father) and personal friend Dwayne Brockington (a fellow Kiwanian) whom I have known over 20 years, helped lead me to Kiwanis. My wife, Frances, (now a fellow Kiwanian in the Darlington, South Carolina, club) and I were talking about getting involved and giving back to our community. I mentioned this to Dwayne and the rest is history.”

Jeri Buckman of the Sisters Chamber of Commerce in Sisters, Oregon, sees exactly how this works in her community and recognizes just how much positive change Kiwanis can bring.

“If people participate in their community, it gives them a sense of belonging and pride knowing that they are giving back,” Buckman says. “I think this has been lost a bit in our society.”

Buckman hits the nail on the head. It seems so simple that it couldn’t possibly be the answer—but time and again it has proven to be just that. If you spread the excitement and show others what good Kiwanis is doing, people want to be a part of it. She says without Kiwanis, Sisters wouldn’t have the food bank, money to give graduating seniors, food basket donations for the fire department at Christmas and the large number of volunteers—people helping people. She recognizes how much Kiwanis can change a community. And people in her community want to be a part of that.

It works in Asheville, North Carolina, too.

Kiwanis Club of Asheville President Jensen Gelfond is proud of his club’s annual fundraiser, a race on the grounds of “America’s largest home,” the Biltmore.

\[\text{AT LEAST 250 million of the world’s primary-school-age children are unable to read, write or do basic mathematics} \]

United Nations

\[\text{United Nations} \]
Tinley Park, Illinois, Kiwanis Club disbanded on the day before its 39th anniversary.

"It's just so disheartening. I truly believe in the philosophy of Kiwanis: to help those in the community who need it. To be done in by disinterest is heartbreaking. We had no choice but to pack it up."

Liz Hollo
Tinley Park Kiwanis Club president
Source: Daily Southtown/Chicago Tribune
"Every day we wake up is an opportunity to make the world a better place in which to live and love. It's a time to make Kiwanis something we are, the way we look at life, the way we do business and the way we live our lives. The world right now needs respect, love, caring and commitment. Kiwanis is just the organization to teach that."

Jane Erickson
Kiwanis International President
Estate. This May marks the 20th Annual Biltmore Kiwanis 15K/5K Classic, an event that draws people to Asheville from all over the country—and, in turn, brings attention to Kiwanis. The one-day event also nets the club about US$20,000, which goes right back into the community for many Kiwanis projects, such as a bike program, backpack project, chess tournament and the ongoing Carolinas District project: the Kiwanis Family Care Center at Mission Hospital’s neonatal intensive care unit.

The club’s membership fluctuates a bit each year, but has held steady between 37 and 42 members for the past four years. Gelfond says it’s important to have a signature project, such as the Biltmore race, to get—and keep—people interested and excited about being part of Kiwanis.

“Some people who would otherwise not know much about Kiwanis come to experience the race because of its location on the one-of-a-kind Biltmore Estate,” Gelfond says, “and they leave with a deeper understanding of Kiwanis and our community efforts. “When someone feels they are an active participant in the community they live in, wonderful things can happen. That’s the core reason why I joined Kiwanis; I wanted to be part of a group that empowered me to dig deeper into my community.”

Steps you can take: There are things you can do right now. See page 50 for some ideas.

PORTRAIT OF OUR WORK:
KIWANIS AROUND THE WORLD

What would happen to these life-changing projects if Kiwanis didn’t exist? Who would help these children and families?

- Kiwanis Kids’ Day Football has been a signature project and fundraiser for the Kiwanis Club of Springdale, Arkansas, for almost 65 years, allowing hundreds of young players and cheerleaders to learn about sportsmanship, teamwork and character development.

- Kiwanis Sail 4 Children brings Kiwanis clubs together from Belgium and France to offer more than 100 children the chance to get on a boat and sail on the North Sea.

- In Malaysia, the Going to School with Kiwanis project has been helping children succeed in school since 2009, complete with backpack distribution, gifts and dictionaries.

- Three times a month, members of the Kiwanis Club of Dawn Busters, Metairie in New Orleans, Louisiana, provide and serve hot meals for the homeless.

- Orphans in Uganda have books, a new kitchen, beds, desks, chickens, cows, a medical clinic, some land and even a bus thanks to support from the Kiwanis Club of Missoula-Sentinel in Montana.

- Cammy Babiarz has Rett syndrome, which has put her in a wheelchair. When Evanston, Illinois, Kiwanians saw her mother, Jackie, lifting a 50-pound wheelchair in and out of her car, they vowed to raise US$50,000 to buy a handicap-accessible vehicle. They did just that. “That was the best Christmas we’d had in a while,” Jackie says.

- From Vancouver to Newfoundland, Kiwanis festivals have celebrated Canada’s best musicians for more than 70 years.

- The children of the Honduran cloud forest are starving. What little food they eat is consumed by the parasites in their bellies. With support from the Kiwanis Children’s Fund and the Kiwanis Club of Federal Way, Washington, Projecto Honduras International delivers worm medicine to the families up in the hills.

- The Kiwanis Club of New Delhi, India, provides prosthetics for those in need through the Kiwanis Prosthetic Limb Clinic.

- New Zealand Kiwanians work hard behind the scenes to organize science fairs for hundreds of students throughout the country—from the north to the south island.