



[Front Page](#) | [Features](#) | [Community](#) | [Education](#) | [Dining](#) | [Letters](#) | [Columns](#)
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Making a difference: Retired attorney has spent the past 10 years devoting himself to award-winning work for Rotary projects throughout the world

By Arthur Lightbourn

As an ambitious young attorney specializing in commercial law, Steve Brown joined Rotary 20 years ago with the idea of possibly cultivating business contacts.

But the unexpected happened.

"Maybe it released something in me that I wasn't sure was there," he said. He discovered the service part of his personality, the part that wants to help others.

Since joining Rotary in 1986, Brown has chalked up thousands of travel miles, improving his knowledge of geography along the way, as he sojourned virtually around the world in his work on behalf of Rotary. He traveled to Africa 10 times, to Afghanistan five times, to Mexico, Sri Lanka, Russia, Germany, the Netherlands and Canada. All at his own expense.

The 59-year-old Brown is the first to admit that he has been extremely fortunate in his life.



"First of all, just living in America and being born here. That was a stroke of luck. I didn't have anything to do with that. Whereas, look at all the billions of people who didn't have that.

"And then being able to get a good education, having a good job, having good financial resources. I don't want to pass through this planet just enjoying what I've got."

He and his sister inherited family money when their parents passed. Together they administered the monies and, he said, were able successfully to make various income-producing investments in real estate, stocks and bonds.

All of which made it possible for him to retire from the legal profession 10 years ago to devote himself full-time to Rotary.

We interviewed Brown in the Carmel Valley offices of Luce Forward, the law firm he has been affiliated with for 34 years and where, although retired, he still maintains an office.

Brown is 6 foot 4, weighs 240, has grey hair, blue eyes, a florid complexion and looks something like a large, friendly version of CBS television news anchor Dan Rather, although when he was younger people used to say he looked like actor Jimmy Stewart.

Brown was born in Spokane, Wash. His father owned a small auto dealership in a farming community near Spokane.

"He was what you might call a 'horse trader.' He wasn't in the horse business, but he would buy something that was of interest, a piece of real estate or whatever, and trade it. He ended up with a fair amount of real estate and investments."

Brown and his wife of 37 years, Susan, grew up across the street from each other in Spokane. "We've known each other since we were 13," he said.

He earned a B.A. in business administration and accounting from Washington State University in 1969; and a law degree from Stanford Law School in 1972.

He immediately joined Luce, Forward, Hamilton and Scripps that same year and has remained there ever since. "I don't move around much," he admitted. "Same house, same wife, same job."

In 1986, shortly after helping to found the La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotary Club, Brown began to realize that his work with Rotary was, in fact, very similar to what he was doing as a lawyer.

"The type of stuff I do in Rotary, I attribute whatever success I've had to my experience as a bankruptcy attorney," he said, "because as a bankruptcy attorney you're a problem-solver where you are put into a morass that you don't see your way out of, but if you have persistence and patience...you find a way."

One of the first things he did as a Rotarian was connect up with Rotary clubs in Tijuana in an effort to foster cooperative projects that would reach across the border. He began attending Rotary Club meetings regularly in Rosarito.

At first, he said, they were a little suspicious of this gringo and what his intentions were. "I think they wondered, 'Why are you doing this? Why do you care about us? What's in it for you? And what are you up to?' I didn't speak the language. I'd go down there. The meetings were in Spanish. I didn't have a clue what was going on. But overtime, they said, 'OK, this guy is serious. Seems harmless, and maybe some good will come of it.'"

And some good did come, starting with the building of sidewalks at a rural school.

Through Rotary's matching grant programs, local Rotary clubs match the funds of clubs in other countries, to help improve schools and launch other life-bettering

programs. Many programs are also funded by donations from private individuals and various foundations.

Brown has also been the primary contact for some 24 projects, including the establishment of a Rotary elementary and middle school equipped with a science lab, library and computer room for 2,800 students in Jalalabad, Afghanistan; a computer-Internet lab for the Nangarhar University also in Jalalabad; a water system for 10,000 people in Kenya; and a sewing center for Somali refugees in San Diego (for which he received San Diego Channel 10's Leadership Award).

The real impact of Rotary and its international programs struck home for Brown in 1992 when he went to South Africa when his club was installing a school library in the impoverished township of Soweto and he met the school's principal, Ellen Kondowe, an extraordinary and inspiring educator whose school had the highest high school matriculation rate of any school in South Africa.

Kondowe credited her success to the fact that she involved the students' parents in the educational process.

Brown then attended a conference of 1,000 Rotarians from countries all over Africa. "I was just dumbfounded that the spirit they had for Rotary was even stronger than we had here," he said. "The power of Rotary really hit me, the internationality of it."

Worldwide, there are 1.2 million Rotarians in some 165 countries.

When he got back to San Diego, he convinced his club to finance a trip here for Ellen Kondowe, thinking how much she would "learn from us seeing our [educational] systems and how we do things.

"She came here and I had it all backwards," he conceded. "It was what we learned from her, rather than what she learned from us. We took her to schools, put her in classrooms in front of these students...she could just hold an audience."

Later, when Brown became a Rotary district governor, he championed an exchange study group of six teachers from Uganda with six teachers from San Diego, impacting thousands of students.

He was also instrumental in placing four scholars from India, Uganda, Eritrea and Kenya in a master's program in Peace and Justice Studies at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego.

"It all started with Ellen Kondowe," he said.

In 2003, Brown received the Eleanor Roosevelt Human Rights Award from the United Nations Association of San Diego.

Most recently, Brown together with other Rotarians focused their attention on Afghanistan, building the Najmul Rotary School in Jalalabad that instructs 2,800 students in two shifts and setting up an Internet computer center at Nangarhar University which had 4,000 students and 250 professors but not one computer.

"In the Rotary School," he said, "we're trying to emphasize female education as much as we can. Of the 2,800 students, about 900 are girls. One of the biggest impediments to female education is the shortage of female teachers.

"For cultural reasons, a lot of the families and female students as they reach

adolescence are uncomfortable with men teachers. We don't spend our energy trying to change the culture. We try to work within the culture.

"What we have done is raise money locally to hire female teachers...We hired five female teachers for \$600 each a year. We just implemented this program in September of this year.

"And while all this was going on we also set up a sister city relationship between San Diego and Jalalabad."

As for the Afghan people, he said, "Even though they look rugged, they're very friendly, very gentle and very gracious. You look at the men on TV with the beards and the way they dress, it's almost a little frightening, but these people will shake your hand and thank you for doing anything you can to help...and they don't have their hand out. They say, 'Show us the way. Giving us money is a short-term fix. We need to be trained.'

"They also say, 'Our country has been in a state of turmoil for 30 years. We don't want that any more. We want to join the civilized world.' They all want the same thing as you and I want. They want a shelter, basic human comforts and opportunities for their families."

San Dieguito Union High School District board briefs; Nov. 16 meeting

By Whitney Youngs

Architectural services: athletic complex

The San Dieguito Union High School District board Nov. 16 voted to approve a contract with RNT Architects for design services for the construction of a new team room complex at Torrey Pines High School.

From corporate clients to murder mysteries, private investigator has sleuthed some of America's most notorious crimes

By Ian S. Port

News Corp. recently canceled publication of O.J. Simpson's already-infamous If I Did It, a book billed as the Juice's confession to the murders of Nicole Brown and Ron Goldman. But San Diego-based private investigator R.W. Peterson doesn't need to read the man's recollections to find out what probably happened. He has his own sources.

Planning ongoing for Torrey Pines High School Foundation's fundraiser 'A Black and White Affaire—anything goes...'

By Ian S. Port

On March 24, 2007, Torrey Pines High School Foundation will host its 14th annual dinner auction, "A Black and White Affaire—anything goes..."

UCSD surgeon built reputation on groundbreaking obesity operation

By Ian S. Port

Consider this alarming fact: Americans are statistically more likely to gain weight in the future than to maintain their current weight. We are getting fatter.

Postal Service offers mailing tips to avoid holiday glitches