Sometimes, a single “yes” can change everything.

I first said “yes” to RYLA in 2007. I met my newfound friend Rochelle Whellams for coffee, and she excitedly told me, “Dean and I are doing a Rotary leadership program for teens and you need to come be a counselor! Say you’ll do it!” I said yes without a clear idea of what I was getting into…but my life has been forever changed because of it.

I first attended RYLA in June 2008. All counselors are encouraged to engage wholeheartedly in every process, activity, and conversation with the students, and first-time counselors get to be surprised and inspired to challenge themselves at every turn. I got to facilitate and participate in deep, meaningful, powerful connections with both the students and adults, and I came away with a whole host of new tools for my own self-awareness and self-actualization.

When I returned home, my husband naturally asked me to share about my time at RYLA. I told him, “You just have to experience it yourself,” so he attended in 2009. Since then, he and I have returned to volunteer nearly every year. RYLA has changed the way we see and appreciate and interact with one another. It gave us a new shared language and new means for connecting with our sons. We gained new hope for the future after seeing so many young people blossom and shine with the confidence, skills, and compassion required to change our world for the better.

If you’ve never attended our 5180/5190 RYLA program, you may imagine (as I first did) a traditional “leadership camp” where students learn how to plan dances and organize committees. That is NOT our RYLA. The central tenet of our program is this: *We can’t lead others until we can lead ourselves, and we can’t lead ourselves unless we know ourselves.* We see every single one of our students as a leader in their own right, each with their own style and preferences and personalities. We help them to recognize and appreciate the brilliance that each of them brings to the world…not only in themselves, but in one another, and in humanity at large.

My younger son was a member of the high school class of 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic turned his world upside down. Midway through his senior year, he struggled in a deep way. My bright, funny, gregarious, intelligent son was having a hard time getting out of bed. His grades were in the toilet. He didn’t make any new friends his senior year, didn’t hang out with his peers, didn’t even attend his own graduation ceremony because he felt so disconnected. My heart ached for him, and for all the other young people I knew who were having similar painful experiences. He was supposed to attend RYLA 2020, which of course ended up getting canceled. But pandemic aside, the RYLA committee had previously decided to open student eligibility to both juniors and seniors, so he got to attend in 2021.

I can’t express the gratitude and joy I felt when I arrived to witness the graduation ceremony at the end of his RYLA week (it brings tears to my eyes even now). The light had come back to his eyes; he was laughing and joking and crying and hugging with his new friends as if they had known each other for years. This phenomenon happens every RYLA week, and it’s what has made me so deeply invested in this program, but seeing the effect of RYLA on my own beloved son, seeing him come back to life and connection, was beyond priceless.

These past two years have been hard all around. I know so many of you have had to cancel big fundraisers, have had to make tough funding choices based on tightened club budgets. I really just want to remind you that your investment in RYLA is one that returns dividends well into the future, beyond the scope of what you can imagine. Thanks to social media, I have been able to follow the lives of former students since that first group I met in 2008. I see them marrying, having children of their own, joining the military, opening businesses, giving back to the world in so many ways. I see them supporting one another, even years after RYLA, celebrating each others’ achievements and encouraging each other in tough times. My heart swells with pride that I was able to play a small but meaningful part in their lives, and you as Rotarians should feel that pride as well. None of this beautiful, important work is possible without you.

As we prepare for RYLA 2022, I encourage you to continue to say “yes” to investing in our youth. The effects of the pandemic on the mental health and social skills of high school students loom as large as ever. The students of this generation need, more than ever, the learning, the personal growth, the camaraderie, and the sheer joy of being young and full of amazing potential that RYLA provides. We have not yet reached our reservation goal of 300 sponsorships this year, so there is still opportunity for you to say “yes” to sending additional students. Even a handful of clubs adding one additional reservation will allow us to continue to provide the level of quality programming and care that our RYLA program is known for. And if you’d like to contribute directly to the program, you can visit our website at www.camp-ryla.org/donate to make a tax-deductible gift.

I have had students tell me that getting sponsored for RYLA was the first time they really felt like a stranger believed in them. On their behalf, and on behalf of *all* the students and adults whose lives have been changed by RYLA (including myself)…**thank you**. Thank you for every “yes” investment you have made in the lives of young people, and for all the “yeses” yet to come.

Yours in humble service,

Marleta Fong

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