Left to Right Callie Summerlin, Lynn Castle, Jade Rayburn and Natasha Garrett

The Women of Rotary

by Micah Leigh Photos by John Fulbright

Rotary International is a worldwide service organization of 1.2 million members who take action to create lasting change across the globe. Founded in Chicago in 1905 by attorney Paul Harris, it has grown to 35,000-plus clubs who work to promote peace, fight disease, support education and more. Southeast Texas has four female Rotary presidents. While it is now commonplace to see women in leadership positions, for most of Rotary's history, women were denied membership. Starting in 1950, several challenges were made to delete the word "male" from the Rotary Constitution. It took 37 years and a fight that went all the way to the Supreme Court to overturn this rule. In 1987, women were finally allowed to join. By 1990, there were 20,000 female members worldwide. Today there are over 200,000, many in leadership positions on the local, district and global level.

Here are four of these amazing women. ▸

Natasha Garrett

President, Orange Rotary

Natasha Garrett is known as a strong shoulder for friends in need. Generous with her time and resources, she is mom to Adrianne, 15, Gavin, 13, and Graham, 8. She and husband, Colin, own and operate G&G Enterprises Construction Corp. After graduating from Conroe High School, she attended Texas A & M. Although she is busy with family and as Rotary president, she still finds time serve the community in other ways. "I am vice-president of our local BNI (Business Network International), I'm on Cattle Baron's Ball planning committee, Date Night for Ubi Caritas, Association of General Contractors and member of Beaumont, Port Arthur, Nederland and Orange Chambers of Commerce."

Garrett says she got into Rotary through an invitation from a friend. "I was out promoting our business about four years ago, and I went to a meeting. I loved the people and the service! It was fun to dive right in and learn just how big it is! Rotary is service that happens all around the world. It's so much bigger than what we see in our local meetings. I really saw this when I attended the international conference recently in Toronto. And Rotarians help not only their communities and the world, they help each other. Last year after Harvey, Rotarians came from all over to help us."

Garrett says she was not seeking a leadership position. "I was attracted to Rotary because I'm a doer and prefer to work behind the scenes, but my members convinced me to take the reins. It gives me an opportunity to get the Rotary message out. Too many people still don't know what we do. I want people to be aware of the wonderful opportunities for our kids in school through Interact and Rotaract clubs. I take my kids to all our events so they will learn to serve. Our group will celebrate 100 years in June. I look forward to doing joint projects with other Rotary clubs. It's an exciting time right now for Rotary in our area!"

Lynn Castle

President, Beaumont Rotary

Lynn Castle has been the executive director of the Art Museum of Southeast Texas since 2000. Born and raised in Fort Collins, Colorado, Castle and husband, Kris, moved to Beaumont in 1986 for his job with Nalco Chemical Company.

Castle, who has her bachelor of arts degree in art education and attended graduate school in art history with an emphasis on museum studies, is very active in the local arts scene. "I am deeply embedded in the local arts community. I sit on two arts-related committees at Lamar and serve as board secretary for the Downtown Beaumont Cultural Arts District. I also serve as a Eucharistic minister at my church."

Rotary had to wait awhile for Castle. "I was asked to join in 2000 to increase networking opportunities, but my two children were in elementary school, so I didn't think I could give my time to Rotary. Once they were off to college, I was able to join. What made me fall in love with Rotary was the community service it provides on so many levels — locally, statewide, nationally and internationally. There are so many ways members can contribute: eradicating polio, sending layettes to Nicaragua, building water wells in third-world countries, rebuilding homes right here after Harvey."

Castle says her goals include increasing membership. "I also want to put planned giving on the radar. Rotary is such a great organization. Why not plan to make a gift when estate planning? Our club gives two generous scholarships to students right out of high school. In addition, this year, we are offering a non-traditional scholarship to older students who want to go back to school to finish their degree."

Castle sums up by saying, "If you are interested in giving back to your community, country or world in a positive way, you need to join Rotary. You will meet like-minded people and enjoy the heck out of it!"