Message from President Courtenay Thompson
June 2009

As the Club heads towards our centenary, the second oldest Rotary Club in Ireland, the third oldest Club outside North America, it would be easy to look at the fabulous contributions from members of the Rotary Club of Belfast over those 97-98 years. This Club has every right to be proud of our predecessors they participated at world level, at RIBI level and District level, and are still doing so, Marnette Lyons is an Assistant District Governor, Maurice Brooks is District's Capital Marketing Officer and, dare I say it, I know the Belfast Club this year is up among the leaders in many fields.

Our efforts towards End Polio Now, when £14,000 was raised in the first 18 months of the Bill and Melinda Gates Challenge probably translates into US$ 60,000 when you add the help from the Gates Foundation going directly to eradicate Polio in those last four countries.

The Club with help from the North Down Club has now collected in excess of 60,000 pairs of used spectacles for Vision Aid Overseas. If all our spectacles are usable, that represents 60,000 people in Sub Sarah Africa now being able to see! And this done by a small Club in Northern Ireland, and if we get the support of all the Clubs in District I have every confidence that we can reach our target in our centenary year of 100,000 pairs of used spectacles. The enthusiasm is infectious, when I was collecting the used spectacles from the Castlereagh recycling base I was approached by the depot manager to enquire how many we had reached now?

On Tuesday 9th June we are joining Kids Out day by taking the children with special needs from Mitchell House to Castle Espie to see what must be one of the most outstanding wildlife centers in Britain. Not only will the Kids see some of the rarest migratory birds seen on these islands but they will share their enthusiasm with their Rotarian hosts, and all of us will enjoy Magic George who will entertain us. Even our recent speaker the head of the Parades Commission was very keen to see if he could hire Magic George to make sure our Parades Season would pass off peacefully.

When I was privileged to accompany the accompany the young people from Highland Park who were participating in our TABU (Towards A Better Understanding) project on their visit to Dublin and Seanad Eireann, I was delighted to visit the Irish National War Memorial Gardens for those who had given their lives in the Great War at Island Bridge Dublin. Yes I remember it being there, near the Trinity Boat Club, but not finished and receiving no public recognition. Now a wonderful tribute to all the people of Ireland who gave their lives in the 1914-18 war for freedom, very moving and beautifully laid out, just a wonderful place to visit and realise that 94,000 people from what became District 1160 had given their lives for our freedom from tyranny.

While I was there I was very happy to pay my respect and that of our Club to the men of the 16th Irish Division, the Dublin Fusiliers, the Connaught Rangers and the Munster Regiment: who on the 1st July 1916 had gone over the top, side by side with their neighbours in the trenches and on this island, the men of the Ulster Division. 9,000 men lost on the first day of the Somme and tragically it was the Irish who both achieved their objectives, only to be ordered to fall back as regiments on either side had failed in their advance leaving both Irish Divisions flanks exposed.

The Club was indeed pleased to be able to host the visit of RIBI President Ian Thomson at the start of his tour of District 1160. He certainly kept the best, to the latter part of his tour of the British Isles and I was proud to present him with a cheque for the $60,000 towards End Polio Now so brilliantly collected by Past President Bryan Johnston with his Brian Hanrahan Lecture, Gordon Millington's organisation of our part of the East Belfast Car Ballot and Marnette Lyons's organisation of the Harvard Glee Club concert. We certainly led the district in our drive for Polio Plus and I would not be surprised if we did not lead in RIBI.

The Club certainly led the way in Rotary Foundation, and in particular the program the Club put on for the benefit of all the Rotary Ambassadorial Scholars studying in Ireland. Derek Baxter and his team organised visits for the Scholars to Parliament Buildings, Stormont and the House of Lords at Westminster as guests of the Lord Laird. One of the most e n j o y a b le and informative days I have been lucky enough to participate in; with a visit planned to Seanad Eireann later in this month.

If the members have not enjoyed our social program and the events, which the Club has put on, entirely due to a lot of hard work from all the members then I would be surprised.

I have enjoyed being the catalyst and observing each member and each group of members exceeding their targets, delivering outcomes, that sometimes they themselves did not really believe the could achieve, when they started their project. One of the best examples has been the development and sheer excellence of our Flash Magazine and our Web site.

Yes I am sure the Club can and will survive till our centenary and will continue to live up to our motto "*Service Above Self*"; this year has been a stepping stone towards a second 100 good years.