**THOUGHTS AND OPINIONS RE: THE COVID PANDEMIC AND ITS EFFECT ON THE UNIVERSITY CITY KIWANIS CLUB**

By

Donald Y. Leggett

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On October 1, 2020, I took the oath of office as President of the University City Kiwanis Club (UCKC) after having served 2 years in line for that day to come. I had served as vice president, and president elect; and in the meantime, was recognized as Kiwanian of the Year.

UCKC has been preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2022 and, at the time, had a membership of approximately 85 wonderfully committed citizens, and has a track record of putting tens of thousands of dollars in Pitt County children’s charities and beyond each year.

The stated purpose of Kiwanis is to ”improve the world one child and one community at a time”. UCKC takes this mission to heart, and is relentless in sponsoring projects and activities to support the various related causes. Most of our sponsored projects are local but we do involve ourselves in solving international children’s needs. Through the years, many children’s organizations have been assisted by Kiwanis grants, and some have come to rely on this help.

Historically, the Club has met each Monday at noon over lunch, with approximately 45-50 members in attendance. Most recently, meetings have been held in the ballroom at the Greenville Country Club. UCKC is governed by a Board of Directors elected by the general membership. This board meets once a month.

I came into the role as President full of fire and spizzerinctum after having watched from the sidelines for two years; and I felt that I had a good vision for a plan to enhance the Club’s overall program of work, as well as bring new and renewed spirit and enthusiasm to the group. Among other approaches, I wanted to prove that through teamwork, we could work hard, build the Club to greater heights, accomplish our mission for the children, honor the Clubs 50-year legacy of excellence, while building friendships and having a lot of fun. We adopted a “make it happen” attitude and set out for a banner year in 2020. No one could have predicted what was to ensue during the next 12 months.

The new Kiwanis year started October 1, 2019 with business as usual. Plans were being brought forward, leadership teams and positions were forming, Club spirit and enthusiasm were high, members were enjoying interacting with each other and appeared to be taking on a renewed “family” approach to their Club life. This was enhanced considerably by a special holiday dinner/social/Club meeting for members and spouses. Again, we were having fun! I hasten to point out that the foundation to all of this was an unwavering awareness and commitment to our primary purpose and reason for existing - - - THE CHILDREN.

How quickly things can change! When March arrived, the Covid situation was heating up, which quickly brought on a whole new focus and set of concerns. We soon realized that we were faced with a very serious set of considerations of which we had not seen the likes of before. We very quickly realized that we would have to cancel our next membership meeting, while “marshalling our troops” to set up priorities to immediately address the scenarios that could be “coming down the pike”. However, I don’t think any of us expected that it was going to last more than a few weeks.

There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that the first concern was the health and safety of our membership, and we would not compromise the rules and regulations handed down by Kiwanis and the appropriate governmental agencies. We then set about to closely monitor the ongoing activity regarding guidelines to be followed in conducting the administration of the Club.

I am of the opinion that our concerns were very similar to such other civic and charitable oriented organizations. The nature of the concerns and the plans for addressing them would naturally differ with club size, program of activities, dues structure, level of enthusiasm, club momentum, and sense of individual responsibility. Having said this, I was, and still am, convinced that the degree of difficulty in navigating the treacherous waters of such a serious adversity is in direct proportion to the ability and willingness to **regularly and effectively communicate with the membership** - - - the more personal, the better.

So, in the sixth month of my presidency, I found myself faced with an unexpected and severe set of conditions demanding a drastic change of protocol and suggesting a shift in priorities. We began to shift our focus from continuing to propel the Club forward **to** maintaining stability and viability, focusing on duties and assignments, building morale, and promoting a survival and safety oriented paradigm. This new approach would emphasize a stronger sense of “family” and sincere efforts to be of assistance to our fellow members.

The natural direction was toward more virtual activity and various other electronic communications. We soon discovered that it was very difficult, if not impossible, to generate a similar degree of interest and enthusiasm among members as we were accustomed, and losing the “magic” power of in-person group dynamics was a difficult, if not impossible challenge.

It was obvious that we needed to find ways to compensate via different and more creative approaches than we were accustomed. We were fortunate in one sense, in that our primary fund-raising tool was a unique enterprise involving the sale of prepackaged peanuts and pecans and “pecan logs” to businesses in our area of the state for resale to their customers. At the same time, we provided these products to club members for local individual sales.

We were then able to find ways to modify our purchase, inventory, and distribution efforts so as to maintain much of our usual income from this business activity with minimum risk. We were able to insulate our club from severe financial distress by tweaking the “nut program” and making modifications in our other financial considerations including dues and fundraising activities.

I hasten to add the obvious, that the pandemic was having its effect on the structure, activities, and survival of many of the charities who stood to be recipients of the Club’s fund-raising efforts. This brought on another set of considerations and adjustments in program administration. These matters are being addressed methodically and with great care.

As I found myself becoming inundated with concerns foreign to those I anticipated when I accepted the role of President of the Club only a few months earlier, I began to take a self-assessment as to my abilities, anxieties, and appropriateness in assuming the role as the “look to” person - - the person who was entrusted not only with the ultimate survival of the University City Kiwanis Club, but to ensure that when the “storm” subsided, the Club would emerge stronger and greater than before - - - maybe different, but stronger.

As the Covid storm began to rage and its seriousness and effect on our club became more apparent, a quote by Haruki Murakami took on a very real meaning, and became etched in my mind:

*And once the storm is over, you won’t remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won’t even be sure whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain, when you come out of the storm, you won’t be the same person who walked in.*

There was never any doubt in my mind that there are very strict codes and requirements that must be met to be worthy of title of “leader”, and these expectations become readily apparent in face of the strong winds brought on by the storms of difficulty and adversity.

I knew that my responsibility was to be all that I could be and there was no doubt in my mind as to my adherence to the approach referenced in a quote popularized as the slogan of Jerry Dunn, who was called “America’s Marathon Man” for his marathon running:

*“Don’t limit your challenges; challenge your limits.”*

As we emerge unsteadily from the turbulent seas of this storm, and glimpse the beacon from on shore, I truly believe that most of the Club members would tell you that they are different in some significant way(s) than before, and these differences have the potential of making UCKC a stronger and more relevant club going forward.

Concerns attributed to Covid dominated our mode of operation as we made adjustments and set about to do good work. We were committed to keeping the Club stable and viable, focused on mission, adhering to the principles of Kiwanis, and continuing to serve our greater community. All the while. we remained cognizant of protecting the health and safety of our membership.

In addition to making changes in our procedures and structure, we placed considerable emphasis on identifying positives that could be gained from dealing with such adversity. We talked about accessing our inner strengths, developing leadership qualities, building confidence, and adding to our individual storehouses of compassion and caring. I hasten to emphasize that our goal was not just to survive, but to be productive, and position the Club to move ahead with “warp speed” when the storm winds subsided.

Our membership was often reminded to strive to follow the advice of John Wesley (below), both as a Club and as individual members.

*“Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, as long as ever you can.”*

I have suddenly realized that there is no logical place to bring this narrative to closure, so I will just make an “executive decision” to begin bringing this ship into port, and hope one can grasp the tenor, feel the concern, and appreciate the efforts of a wonderful group of members to wade into difficulty and adversity to ensure that the Children of the greater Greenville community and beyond are not deprived of the care to which they have been accustomed to receiving from UCKC for the past 50 years.

At the time of this writing, the Club is still operating under modified protocol relative to Covid official guidelines, which up to now, have included significant amounts of virtual programming. However, we did have our first in-person meeting of the membership in approximately a year on April 5, 2021 (maximum 25 members permitted.)

It would appear, then, that barring any unforeseen crises, we are returning to some degree of normalcy. With the prospects of significant cooling of the Covid pandemic, let’s take a quick look at some of the effects on UCKC left in the wake of the “storm.”

**Below are some summative impressions and opinions pertaining to UCKC that I carry away from my time during the pandemic thus far.**

*(Please note that I assumed the Presidency of the Club on October 1, 2019, and my term as President ended on September 30, 2020. At that point, I continued to serve as a member of the Board of Directors as Immediate Past President, and that is my position with the Club at the time of this writing.)*

Members will come away with a renewed appreciation for the value and importance of the Club to the area and mission we serve.

Members will have assessed their inner selves either consciously or unconsciously or both, and will build on their inner strengths to become even stronger; and be more acutely aware of the value of loyalty, caring, commitment, and teamwork in carrying out their roles in the Club and all of society.

Once the Pandemic is over, and due attention and evaluation have been given to the Club’s efforts to keep all its pieces together and productive, I am convinced that a tweaking and readjustment process will position itself for a new highly valued, highly respected, and highly productive organization that will grow stronger and more relevant going forward.

Members will have a renewed awareness and appreciation for a family atmosphere within the Club and a keen sense of the importance of family values in carrying out Club business and social activities.

Members will be even more aware of the necessity of keeping the Club’s commitment to the CHILDREN in the forefront, and it’s being the “glue” that holds all of the Club’s entities solidly together through the good and difficult times.

As the Pandemic wore on, there seemed to be a tendency to become more impatient, discouraged, and confused as to the best course of action and changes needed to do the most good.

It seemed that considerable momentum was lost as the club found it necessary to modify its schedule of activity which affected the amount of assistance we might be able to provide charitable organizations; while at the same time, because of the Pandemic, some of these beneficiary organizations either had to modify or cease some or all of their programming. This, of course, influenced the numbers and amounts of grants requested from our Club. It is difficult to envision where this domino effect ended. In spite of it all, the Club was able to raise a significant percentage of the income that it normally made available to pass on to the CHILDREN.

The University City Kiwanis Club has encountered a challenge of gigantic proportions that could have threatened its survival. Barring unforeseen circumstances, it appears that the Club will weather the “storm”, stay the course, and emerge more determined than ever to grow even stronger as an on -going force for good in the greater Pitt County community and beyond.

This will happen because of the “make it happen” approach by a talented membership with a broad far-reaching range of vision, untiring work ethics, and a tenacious determination to do all the good they can.