

Dave Fihn honored for 53 years of service to Rotary Club

by Vicki L. Gerdes, December 22, 2015



Longtime Detroit Lakes resident Dave Fihn and his wife, Shirley, accepted congratulations from Mayor Matt Brenk (at left) and Noon Rotary Club President Ed Gehrke (right) after Thursday, December 17, 2015 was declared Dave Fihn Day in Detroit Lakes. The proclamation was made in honor of Fihn's 53 years of service to Rotary. He first joined the Detroit Lakes club in November 1962.

When Dave Fihn graduated from the University of Minnesota's School of Dentistry in 1957, he never imagined that his chosen profession would take him all over the globe. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure how he was going to afford room and board. "I was absolutely broke," says the Halstad, Minn., native. "I had to borrow \$300 to get through my last semester at dental school."

So when the U.S. Army recruited him to serve in its Dental Corps, he wasn't exactly an unwilling draftee. "It was good for me," he says. "It was the first time I had really made any money."

Dave would spend the next three years in Munich, Germany, with his wife Shirley, earning the rank of captain. While he was stationed in Germany, Dave and Shirley took the opportunity to travel to as many European countries as they could manage, eventually visiting every western European country except Portugal. "We did a lot of traveling during those three years," Dave says. They even had the opportunity to visit the Soviet Union in the summer of 1960, despite the fact that the "Iron Curtain" was in full force at that time.

The Fihns' oldest son, Mark, was born in Munich, while daughter Lisa was born after they returned to Braham, Minn. (where Dave's family had moved when he was 13 years old).

Dave's first opportunity to open a dental practice came in Detroit Lakes, where he and Shirley moved in December 1960. "There were eight dentists in town at that time," he said. "We were all on the same block of

Washington Avenue, between Highway 10 and Frazee Street, and we were all on the second floor (though some were in different buildings).” Dave said he didn’t really like not being on the ground floor, because it wasn’t as readily accessible. “Those stairs were hard for mothers with young children,” he says.

After a couple of years in Detroit Lakes, Dave joined the local Noon Rotary Club, and was inducted as a Rotarian in November 1962.

This past Thursday, Dave was honored for his 53 years of service with Rotary, as Mayor Matt Brenk declared Dec. 17, 2015, as Dave Fihn Day in Detroit Lakes. It was just the latest in a string of commendations given to Fihn in recognition of his adherence to the Rotary motto of “service above self.”

Between 1983 and 2006, Fihn used his professional skills as a dental service volunteer with the Rotary Foundation to travel to the Philippines, the Brazilian Amazon, Hong Kong, Honduras, Jamaica, Thailand and Mexico. In total, he logged 427 days, or about 14 months as a dental volunteer during those trips, most of which were done with his wife Shirley by his side.

He even served a stint as general secretary of the International Fellowship of Rotary Dental Volunteers. “I have a profession that is much needed in many areas of the world,” Fihn says, adding that people who grew up in the U.S. have no real concept of how little good dental care is available in some countries.

On one memorable occasion in 1983, Dave spent six weeks working in a refugee camp in the Philippines, where he was the only dentist available to treat 14,000 Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian refugees.

Dave spent roughly 20 weeks working in Jamaica during his four visits there between 1993-99. “They speak English in Jamaica, so it was easier to work there,” he explained. Not that it was precisely relaxing: on one memorable occasion, Fihn extracted 126 teeth in one day. “Most of the work they need is extractions,” he said, adding that a combination of poor diet and lack of good dental care - there are less than 100 practicing dentists in the whole country.

Trips to non-English speaking countries were a little more difficult, though he quickly learned to communicate well enough to do his work. “One of the first phrases I learned in Spanish was, ‘Where does it hurt?’” Dave said wryly.

In 2005, Fihn was awarded the Service to Humanity Award in recognition of his dedication to providing dental care for refugees and communities in need during more than 14 mission trips abroad.

But Fihn’s service to Rotary has gone far beyond using his skills as a dentist. In 1974, he spent eight weeks in Denmark as a Rotary Group Study Exchange (GSE) team leader. He still occasionally gets together with the team he led in Denmark, and the Fihns have hosted multiple GSE families in their Detroit Lakes home over the years.

He once served as a Rotary Friendship Exchange leader on a trip to South Africa, has worked as a counselor at the RYLA (Rotary Youth Leadership Award) Camp, and along with his wife, has hosted several Rotary Youth Exchange students.

He served as president of the Noon Rotary Club in Detroit Lakes from 1979 to 1980, and was named Rotarian of the Year in 1981. In 1982, he received the Rotary International Service Above Self Award, and from 1985 to 1986, he served as a Rotary District Governor, receiving the Rotary Foundation’s Citation for Meritorious Service about a year later. From 2002 to 2003, he served as the regional coordinator for the Rotary International Foundation.

For 40 years, Fihn maintained perfect attendance with the local club, attending meetings in 35 other states and 27 different countries in order to do so. “Rotary really emphasized good attendance,” he explained. “If you missed a meeting, you were expected to make it up somewhere else.”

Fihn is also a longtime member of the Order of Rotary International Fellowship (ORIF), attending most of their annual meetings.

Dave and Shirley Fihn funded their first gift annuity with Rotary in 1993, and he has sponsored dozens of Paul Harris Fellowships through the years, along with chairing the District Polio Plus, annual programs, and permanent fund drives.

Though his work with Rotary has taken him and his wife all over the globe, the Fihns are largely content to stay at home these days. “I’m 82 now... my exploring days are more or less over,” he says, adding, “I’ve been very, very lucky.”