

Paying it forward

Ask and you shall receive was the order of the day, when *Rotary Down Under* caught up with past Youth Exchange student and newly elected Federal MP Angie Bell.

Elected to the House of Representatives for Queensland's Division of Moncrieff on the Gold Coast in May, Angie may well be Australia's first exchange student to take up Federal Office.

"I'm very, very proud to have been a Rotary Exchange Student. It was life-changing for me as a young person. Where I am in my journey now... it affected me so profoundly when it comes to my passion for equality of opportunity and that's one of my core principles."

While Angie goes out of her way to give back to the organisation she feels a great debt of gratitude towards – visiting many Rotary clubs and speaking at Rotary events as often as she can – membership of a single club seems too limiting for someone representing a vast and diverse population.

"One of my passions is for diversity and for minority groups and making sure nobody is marginalised. I welcome all walks of life with open arms. That's why I'm here, to serve the people of Moncrieff, to serve all of the people of Moncrieff."

"So I would prefer to help many clubs rather than just one; if I could be an

honorary member of Rotary or a global member of Rotary that would make me very happy."

And, indeed, at that precise moment, that is exactly what happened.

District 9640 governor elect Andy Rajapakse whipped out a pin, metaphorically got down on one knee and popped the question. "Angie, I invite you to be Australia's newest Honorary Rotarian. We will connect you with the Gold Coast Passport Rotary Club, which gives you a passport to go to all Rotary clubs – any of the 36,000 Rotary clubs in the world."

A delightfully unexpected twist to Angie's Rotary journey, as was her journey's beginning.

"All of the other Rotary Exchange nominees were from private schools – I was the only person from a public school," she recalls of the selection process. "The board asked a number of questions and I was the successful candidate. It was a bit of a surprise to my dad, because we hadn't told him that I'd been nominated."

"My parents were not Rotary members, they had limited means, so for me this was an opportunity that took me out of a large public school. It was something very special. I was the first person in my family to finish high school and the first person in my family to go abroad. It was the first time I had been exposed to another

culture, another language, another way of living."

Angie spent 12 months in the Danish city of Herning on the Jutland peninsula. With the help of her first host mother, she was fluent in Danish within three months, and quickly made new friends; some of which are still her best friends today. At the end of her exchange year, she came back to Australia with an open mind, a firm focus on attending university and a great appreciation for culture and the arts. It was also the beginning of her representative career.

"I've been in representative roles since then; as a sales representative,

representing corporate companies, representing over 2000 women in Queensland as president of LNP Women and, of course, representing Australia was the highest honour. And I did that when I was 17 and shared our Australian culture in Denmark.

"Youth Exchange gave me that sense of representing something bigger than myself, and here I am now, representing the 177,222 people who live in Moncrieff. That's the pinnacle of representation and I think Rotary set me up for that; it set me up for understanding what it means to others to represent your country and your family."

While a political career was not part of the original life-plan, Angie says it

has given her the opportunity to help inspire young people, just as Rotary did for her; something she is very passionate about.

"It's about being inspired and it's about paying that inspiration forward. It's so important for young people.

When I met Joe Hockey, for example, I felt inspired by his warmth and his friendship and the opportunity to get to know a cabinet minister. It had a very big effect on me and now, to be in this role, I need to make sure I don't underestimate how that has an effect on young people and the people around me. It's a very serious thing – to inspire young people.

"Joining the LNP gave me another opportunity to give. I started giving to the party and I started giving to the people around me; essentially, Rotary taught me that.

"And I think once you realise that's what life is about, then the world's your oyster. If you look after others, you will be fine. Learning that as a young person is so, so important to the outcomes in your life."

Angie will be inducted as an Honorary Member of the Gold Coast Passport Rotary Club by District 9640 governor Harry Bolton on August 16. •



(Photos: @rhysmartinphotographer)

