

Sidcup Rotarian Erik Foster is a "Champion of Change"

Club member Erik Foster has been named as "A Champion of Change" by RIBI having been nominated by immediate Past District Governor Chris Barnett. He was presented with his award by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg who thanked him for his services to the community, at a ceremony held at Dover House in Whitehall.

He has developed a scheme designed to help unemployed young people into work. It was developed after Erik recognised the urgent need for help amongst the young unemployed in the London Borough of Bexley. He contacted the Job Centre Plus youth team in Bexleyheath who were enthusiastic about his ideas. After intensive planning, regular mentoring sessions with a team of Rotary volunteers from Sidcup were commenced and now take place every fortnight.

Erik, aged 70 retired from his job as MD of the operating arm of a major shipowner running a great many predominantly large tankers in 1999, and has been busy as he puts it "Giving back to the community". He became Chair of the club's Vocational and Youth Opportunities Committee in 2012 and has since spent considerable time and effort implementing and expanding the Youth Unemployment Program both with Job Centre Plus and local Secondary Schools.

The Champions of Change Awards will be awarded annually in the United Kingdom and in this, the first year there were 12 recipients, chosen from nominations for the awards which were in two categories — domestic and international — and invited from across RIBI's 29 Districts, which takes in 1,800 clubs and 50,000 members.

The dozen "Champions" met with Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and MP's at the presentation ceremony. After the presentation RIBI President, Nan McCreadie said: "This was a wonderful opportunity to recognise Erik and all the other Rotarians who give their time and talents to help communities at a time when they need it most. Rotarians come from all walks of life, they are men and women who want to make a difference. We wanted to bring attention to the excellent work that the worthy volunteers undertake everyday; much of which is funded solely by the individuals, who work neither for money nor for recognition but to help causes that they are passionate about and believe in wholeheartedly. Awardees' achievements included helping with health and education projects in Uganda, Kenya, India, Pakistan and Sumatra, caring for the poor around Bethlehem, and, nearer home, to enhancing facilities in local communities and spearheading the voluntary flood relief project in the Somerset Levels".

Mr Clegg spoke of the "extraordinary things" which the award winners had done.

He was impressed by the variety of achievements of the 12 awardees.

"It was an honour to meet and be able to congratulate them," he said.

"They have all given so much time, so selflessly, and with so much passion to help others and make our society stronger and fairer."

Afterwards, Erik said: "Along with all members of Rotary the world over, I want to make a change for the better. Helping young people find a job, give them self respect and give them a helping hand in life is paramount to the success of the scheme. Members of the Rotary Club of Sidcup have been holding these sessions since August 2012 and they have proved a great success and have received enthusiastic support from Bexleyheath Job Centre. The meetings are held at the Job Centre at Bexleyheath. There are usually about ten young people at a time, and three members from Rotary. Our club has a pool of about a dozen members who either are or have been employers, or who been responsible for numbers of employees. The youngsters (18 to 24 yrs) attend voluntarily, unlike the Job Centre's own scheme where they have to attend a course also designed to give them information on job hunting, once they "Sign on". Now, there are five other clubs in Kent running the scheme and we are working to get the scheme rolled out throughout the UK".