

Thirty Years of Rubber Duckies

How local Rotary clubs turned an idea into almost \$3 million to improve their community.

In 1989, Dick Weaver had an idea for a fundraiser. As the newly elected president of the Columbia Center Rotary club in Kennewick, Washington, he had just returned from the annual PETS (president-elect training) Conference where he'd learned about a new fundraising method called a duck race.

Dean Hoffman, president and CEO of Columbia Industries (CI), a local non-profit organization providing vocational training for people with disabilities, was also a member of Weaver's club. He found out about the duck race independently and thought it could be a great source of income for their organization. Hoffman and Weaver presented their idea to the club's board, who enthusiastically endorsed the idea, but felt that the logistics and administration of a project of that scale might be too much for a single club. Weaver quickly recruited three other local Rotary clubs into the endeavor.

The concept of the duck race was simple. Thousands of small plastic ducks would be rented from a company in Arizona. Rotary club members would sell tickets to their friends and associates for five dollars each. The corresponding number of each ticket would be attached to a plastic duck, which was then officially entered in the race. The ducks would be dumped into the Columbia River, float down a designated course, and reach the finish line, where they would be collected in the order of their arrival. The holders of the winning tickets would receive prizes purchased by the club or donated by local corporate sponsors.

The participating clubs would divide the net proceeds based on the number of tickets sold. Each club would donate the proceeds to their favorite local charities and non-profit organizations or invest in worthwhile community projects, student scholarships, or philanthropy. The Rotary clubs would receive publicity and recognition for their charitable work in the community. CI would provide services such as marketing and administrative support, and their employees would get helpful work experience. In return, CI would receive thirty-five percent of the net profit received by each of the clubs. It was a win-win situation for everyone.

Weaver and Hoffman, however, needed approval from CI's board of directors to proceed. Gail Greager, CI's marketing director at the time, remembers many skeptical looks from the board members as Weaver explained how the race would be organized. The board's conclusion was, "well, we'll try it for one year and see how it works." Hoffman assigned Greager to work on the duck race full-time. She managed all of the marketing and promotion and coordinated the various committees created to deal with ticket sales, donations, race-day events, and parking.

While the concept of the race was simple, the organization and logistics were not. The time of the race was dictated by when the ducks would be available from the rental company, which was in early October. That left only a few months to organize and put on the event. Greager remembers Dick Weaver saying, "This is crazy. This is crazy! We can't do it. We had no idea if the ducks were going to sell. We didn't think to notify the state Gambling Commission. I think we were the first Rotary club in Washington state to sponsor a duck race. We had no idea what to do."

In addition to the steering committee, volunteers were recruited to serve on ad hoc committees that dealt with ticket sales and soliciting donated prizes. In future years the

committee structure became more organized and someone from each of the participating clubs served on each committee.

Expenses included the cost of renting the ducks, marketing and promotional materials, and purchasing some prizes to ensure that at least fourteen winners received substantial winnings, which included a new Ford Explorer valued at \$22,000, an eighteen-foot boat, motor, and trailer valued at \$8,000, and a \$4,000 Caribbean cruise for two.

In the rush to put on that first race, no one had thought to contact the Washington State Gambling Commission. The duck rental company had recommended that the tickets be large enough to carry lots of advertising and designed so that a portion of the ticket could be detached and folded into a self-mailer that contained the money. It allowed a buyer to purchase more than one duck with the same ticket. When the Gambling Commission found out about it, they determined that the race was a lottery, and state law required that a separate ticket be sold for each duck. The next year's tickets had to be redesigned, and obtaining a gambling license became an annual expense.

In its first year, the Great Mid-Columbia Duck Race became the largest duck race in the Western United States. Twenty-eight thousand rubber ducks were rented, and almost that number of tickets were sold, raising almost \$140,000 and generating a net profit of \$77,000.

Based on the first race's success, more local Rotary clubs adopted the duck race as their primary fundraiser. For the second race in 1989, thirty thousand ducks were rented, of which almost 25,000 were sold. Before long, local car dealers and other merchants were contacting the organizers to donate prizes and take advantage of the publicity.

In the third year of the race, Dan Boyd, president of the Pasco-Kennewick Rotary Club, came up with the idea of recruiting and recognizing corporate sponsors called "Quacker-Backers,"

who might buy twenty-five ducks or fifty tickets at a time. It was easier to sell twenty-five duck tickets to one buyer than to sell twenty-five individual tickets.

The race was clearly a matter of trial and error in those first years. Dick McLean, a future president of the Richland Rotary club, became involved that first year. Later, he became so associated with the duck race that he changed his email address to “rlmcduck.” According to McLean, the clubs initially relied on the duck rental company. “They had a printed guide to organizing and conducting a duck race,” he recalled. “In addition to renting the small plastic ducks, the company also rented large inflatable ducks and provided generic designs for T-shirts and other memorabilia. We started out depending on the expertise of the duck rental company, but as we progressed each year we got to the point where could teach the rental company how to put on a race.”

CI operated a modern sewing shop, so for the first race Dick Weaver designed a special canvas bag large enough to hold the 28,000 ducks that would be dropped by a crane operator into the Columbia River. On its first test, the weight of the ducks burst the bag, and the ducks covered CI’s parking lot. That problem was solved by recruiting a local garbage disposal company as a sponsor and using a metal garbage dumpster to drop the ducks into the river.

For the race site, the organizers chose a quiet section of the Columbia River near where the Atomic Cup unlimited hydroplanes race was held each year during the Tri-Cities’ annual Water Follies weekend. McLean remembered, “When we first did the race, we didn’t have any defined course. We just dumped the ducks close to the shoreline and tried to funnel them with a floating oil boom. We borrowed a heavy, cumbersome log raft from a local marina. That didn’t work so well when it came to collecting the winning ducks.”

Bill Siefken, a Richland Rotarian who owned a construction company, came up with the idea of replacing the oil boom with floating PCV pipe and designed the first custom-made collection barge. “Twenty-foot-long sections of eight-inch PCV pipe were glued together to form the course, but they had to be cut apart after each race. After a few years, Ken Williams came up with an effective coupling system that coupled and uncoupled the sections of pipe,” Siefken remembered.

The new collection barge that replaced the log raft was christened *Konducki*. It also used PCV pipe as the means of flotation. Siefken recalled, “We tested it in my swimming pool by having Tom Cowan, a local attorney and president of Richland Rotary during the first year of the race, get on it to see if it would float. He was bigger than any of the rest of us.”

The ducks were collected as they arrived at an open channel that ran through the center of the barge. It had a plastic tube big enough to allow a three-to-four-inch rubber duck to float through it. “We collected the winning ducks in numbered small clear plastic bags until we were sure that we had enough for each of the prize winners,” Siefken said. That was complicated by the fact that the ducks often arrived *en masse* and not all of them had been sold. Unsold ducks had no numbers.

“It took about ninety minutes for the ducks to navigate the course about the length of a football field,” McLean remembered. “It seemed like an eternity! We had a problem with the ducks washing up on shore. Since we had to pay the rental company for any ducks we lost, we had to station Rotarians all along the bank to keep people from going down and picking up a souvenir.”

The solution to that problem was to shorten the course to about fifty yards and to line the shore with floating plastic pipe. But the race still took too long. Someone came up with the idea

of dumping the ducks further out into the river so that the current would make them float faster. “When 40,000 plastic ducks are dumped into the river at one time, they sink under the surface and then blossom up like an atomic bomb expanding out in all directions,” McLean said. “We didn’t have any floating pipe to mark the outer boundary of the course, and many of the ducks got caught by the river’s current and off they went. We used jet boats provided by a local company to try to force them back onto the course, but that was only partially successful.” They watched helplessly as most of the ducks rode the waves down the river. The next year, someone returned a duck they had found floating near McNary Dam, fifty miles downstream in Oregon.

By 1998, the tenth year of the event, the Mid-Columbia Duck Race had grown into a major community event with the addition of a parade, a pancake breakfast, food vendors, a golf tournament, a car show and shine, a burger contest, live entertainment, and an egg hunt. By then, corporate sponsors were accounting for \$40,000 a year in ticket sales, and the event had raised more than \$1 million and benefitted more than sixty charities and local scholarship programs.

The biggest single expense of the race, renting the ducks at a cost of \$.53 cents per duck, was covered by a donation from a local bank. Publicity for the event grew to include a special section in the local newspaper, Rotarians and members of their families dressed in “Lucky Ducky” duck suits, and at least one large inflatable duck that could be transported and set up at key locations around the community.

Greager designed the first Lucky Ducky suit and found a seamstress in Walla Walla to make it for her. At one time, there were three adult duck suits and one child’s suit. She remembers a very hot day in early fall when her whole family wore the suits while being taped by a local TV crew. Lucky Ducky was not supposed to talk, but she could hear the muffled voice of her son standing next to her saying, “Mom, get me out of here!” Later, she became the first female

president of the Pasco-Kennewick Rotary Club. The club hired CI to manufacture duck suits for sale or rental to other Rotary clubs around the country as an additional fundraiser. Anyone who spent hours inside the sweaty duck suits with the Styrofoam heads warily recalled the threat of small children who came charging at their legs with their heads down looking for a hug from Lucky Ducky.

The large inflatable ducks added to the adventure. In the windy Tri-Cities, it was imperative to anchor the ten-foot tall ducks so they wouldn't blow away. That was not the only danger. In the first year of the race, a \$3,000 inflatable duck was stolen from the front of a local sporting store. Rotarians filed a stolen duck report with the police, and the theft was covered by all of the local TV stations. The duck was returned by the "duck-nappers" two days later, minus the air compressor used to inflate it.

Dick McLean remembers another occasion, perhaps seven or eight years into the race, when he and another Rotarian took the inflatable duck to a car dealership in Pasco. "We plugged in the compressor and started to blow up the duck. When it got nearly blown up, the seam along the back of the duck's neck gave way, and all of the air escaped in a big whoosh. We tried to think of something that we could use to plug the foot-long hole." Off they went to a nearby big box store in search of a solution. "I came up with the idea of trying to seal it up with a package of washcloths held by large safety pins. I got into the duck and crawled up to the hole and then stretched the washcloths over the hole and pinned them securely to the duck with the safety pins. We turned the air compressor back on, and the duck was rising up to its full height when we heard this zinging sound as the safety pins gave way and were flying off the head of the duck like shrapnel. We returned the duck to the rental company."

By the twentieth anniversary of the race in 2008, a record 40,501 duck tickets were sold, generating more than \$200,000. More than \$175,000 was distributed by the six participating Rotary clubs to more than eighty charities and other community endeavors. The duck race is the only fundraiser for the Tri-Cities Sunrise Rotary Club which accounts for forty percent of all the duck tickets sold, including the amazing mother-daughter team of Evelyn and Nanette Walkley who, together, sell as many as 2,500 tickets a year. Other Rotary members, like Jack Zinn and Jon Putz of the Richland club, sold more than a thousand duck tickets a year—Zinn, then in his 90s, selling his one ticket at a time!

After twenty years, the race had outgrown its ad hoc, volunteer organizational structure. Mike Tuohy, a retired hospital administrator and president of the Columbia Center Rotary Club, was his club's representative to the organizing committee. "It dawned on me and others at the same time that, 'Hey, after twenty years, this thing isn't going away. We need to get organized.'" They incorporated, drew up organizational documents that had to be approved by all six clubs, and negotiated with the Boy Scouts to provide much of the administrative record-keeping and reporting that had been parceled out to volunteers before. They reviewed and renegotiated contracts and generally put the race on a sound administrative footing for future years.

During the next twenty years, Rotarians had solved most of the technical problems that had plagued the race in earlier years. In addition to using a dumpster to drop the ducks and shortening and defining the race course, the original *Konducki* collection barge was replaced by a lighter, and more mobile, *Konducki II*, which featured Styrofoam flotation, a better catch system, and casters on the bottom that allowed it to be rolled into the water.

As we approach the thirtieth anniversary of the duck race in 2018, it is clear that the Great Mid-Columbia Duck Race has been an unqualified success. The number of ducks in the race has

grown to more than 40,000 each year. More than forty local sponsors recognize the value of being associated with the race and regularly donate prizes. Toyota of Tri-Cities has provided the top prize, a brand new Toyota, for the past fourteen years. Carmen Marquart, marketing manager for the firm, expressed the thoughts of most of the sponsors: “The local Rotarians give so much to our community, this donation is just one way we can help them fulfil their mission and ensure the Tri-Cities area remains one of the best places around to live, work, and play.”

Over the past three years, the Great Mid-Columbia Duck Race has generated an average of \$190,000 a year, while the net proceeds received by the six clubs averaged more than \$111,000. The clubs estimate that over the past thirty years, almost \$3 million has been donated by the local Rotary clubs to more than a hundred local charitable organizations, various scholarship programs, and projects that improve the quality of life of the Tri-Cities community.

But Dick McLean believes that the greatest benefit has been how the duck race has brought the local Rotary clubs closer together. “It was the ideal fundraiser because it challenged us from the very beginning. And the memories of the race—the ducks bobbing down the course, the small child being hugged by Lucky Ducky, the comradery of working together on a shared project—remain with those who have experienced them forever. What better example of Rotary’s motto, ‘Service above Self!’”

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