

A Brief History of Lions Clubs International

The International Association of Lions Clubs began as the dream of a Chicago insurance man Melvin Jones, who wondered why local business clubs -- he was an active member of one -- could not expand their horizons from purely business concerns to the betterment of their communities and the world at large.

Jones' idea struck a chord within his own group, the Business Circle of Chicago, and they authorized him to explore his concept with similar organizations from around the United States. His efforts resulted in an organizational meeting at a local hotel on June 7, 1917.

The 12 men who gathered there overcame a natural sense of loyalty to their parent clubs, voted the "Association of Lions Clubs" into existence, and issued a call for a national convention to be held in Dallas, Texas, USA in October of the same year.

Thirty-six delegates representing 22 clubs from nine states heeded the call, approved the "Lions Clubs" designation, and elected Dr. William P. Woods of Indiana as their first president. Guiding force and founder Melvin Jones was named acting secretary. Thus began an association with Lionism that only ended with his death in 1961.

That first convention also began to define what Lionism was to become. A constitution and by-laws were adopted, the colors of purple and gold approved, and a start made on Lionism's *Objectives* and *Code of Ethics*.

One of the objects was startling for an era that prided itself on mercenary individualism, and has remained one of the main tenets of Lionism ever since. "No Club," it read, "shall hold out the financial betterment of its members as its object."

Community leaders soon began to organize clubs throughout the United States, and the association became "international" with the formation of the Windsor, Ontario, Canada Lions Club in 1920. Clubs were later organized in China, Mexico, and Cuba. By 1927, membership stood at 60 000 in 1 183 clubs.

In 1935, Panama became home to the first Central American club, with the first South American club being organized in Colombia the following year. Lionism reached Australia in 1947 and Europe in 1948, as clubs were chartered in Sweden, Switzerland, and France. In 1952, the first club was chartered in Japan.

The International Association of Lions Clubs is today the largest service organization in the world with over 1.4 million members in more than 43,300 clubs in 714 Districts covering 182 countries and geographic areas. Lions Clubs are not social clubs, although there are social benefits to membership. Lions Club members give their time, skills and resources

to raise funds for charitable giving both in their communities and internationally.

The major focus of Lions fund raising activities is sight conservation, although other projects are pursued such as drug awareness programs in high schools, diabetes awareness programs and other programs that are specific to individual Clubs and Districts. Lions took up sight conservation as their major goal after a speech given by Helen Keller at the Lions International Convention held at Cedar Point, Ohio, in 1925. At that time, Helen Keller challenged the Lions to become "Knights of the Blind", a challenge that has become a rallying cry for Lions projects around the world.

Lions work in the area of sight conservation is carried out at many levels. Individual Clubs sponsor free eye screening programs using mobile eye clinics. In many countries, Clubs sponsor eye surgery camps where cataract surgeries are performed at no charge for those that can't afford this medical care. Many clubs collect old eye glasses for distribution to the needy in other countries.

The International Association of Lions Clubs is the largest non-governmental organization associated with the United Nations and was called upon by the United Nations and the World Health Organization to raise funds for an international program of sight conservation. It has been estimated that 40 million cases of curable and preventable blindness exist on this planet today. Without intervention, this is projected to become 80 million by the end of the decade.

The International Association of Lions Clubs began a program of fund raising that they called "Campaign Sight First" in order to cure/prevent 40 million cases of blindness worldwide. Over \$148,600,000 has been raised by Lions all over the world for this program. Eye hospitals are being built in the places that most need them. In India alone, over 300,000 cataract surgeries have been performed and that number is rapidly growing. Lions services to humanity range from purchasing eyeglass for a child whose parents can't afford them to multimillion dollar programs to cure blindness on a worldwide scale.

The Lions International Headquarters is in Oak Brook, Illinois, USA.

Adapted from LionNet.com