

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION HISTORY

History: Lions Clubs International began as the dream of Chicago insurance man Melvin Jones. He believed that local business clubs should expand their horizons from purely professional concerns to the betterment of their communities and the world at large.

Jones' own group, the Business Circle of Chicago, agreed. After contacting similar groups around the country, an organizational meeting was held on June 7, 1917, at the LaSalle Hotel in Chicago. The new group took the name of one of the groups invited, the "Lions Clubs," and a national convention was held in Dallas, Texas, USA in October of 1917. Thirty-six delegates representing 22 clubs from nine states were in attendance. The convention began to define what the association was to become. A constitution, by laws, objects and code of ethics were approved. Among the official objects adopted in years was one which read, "No club shall hold out the financial betterment of its members as its object." This object has remained one of the association's main tenets ever since.

Dr. W. P. Woods, of Evansville, Indiana, USA was elected as the first president. Melvin Jones was named acting secretary; thus beginning his relationship with Lions that ended only with his death in 1961.

Just three years after its formation, the organization became international when a club in Windsor, Ontario, Canada was established in 1920. Clubs were later organized in Mexico, China and Cuba. By 1927, membership stood at 60,000 in 1,183 clubs.

In 1935, Panama became home to the first Central American club; the first club in South America was organized in Colombia the following year. Sweden, then France, and the rest of Europe came into the association in 1948. Japan had clubs by 1952, and the so-called "Eastern Bloc" was unblocked in 1989 with the formation of clubs in Hungary, Poland and Estonia. In 1990, a club was chartered in Moscow and today over 100 Lions clubs are demonstrating value of service in countries once closed to voluntary action.

Perhaps the single event having the greatest impact on the association's service commitment occurred in 1925 when Helen Keller addressed the Lions at the international convention in Cedar Point, Ohio, USA. It was there that she challenged Lions to become "Knights of the blind in the crusade against darkness."

In 1990 Lions launched their most aggressive sight preservation effort to date, SightFirst. The more than 200 million dollar program strives to rid the world of preventable and reversible blindness by closing the gap between existing health care services and those that remain desperately needed. This helped prevent blindness in over 18 million people. Today's Lions are Launching Sight First II with a goal of 200 million dollars.

Broadening its role in international understanding, the association helped the United Nations form the Non-Governmental Organizations section in 1945, and continues to hold consultative status today. Each year, during the Lions Day with the United Nations ceremonies, an award is presented to the grand prize winner of the Lions International Peace Poster Contest, itself a significant program which draws over 350,000 entries annually.

Another significant event in the association's history occurred in 1987, when Lions Clubs International became the first major service club organization to admit women as members.

Since those first years, the association has grown to include nearly 1.3 million men and women in more than 46,000 clubs located in 200 countries and geographical areas.