

## Touchstone Story #80 It's Presidential



**Photo Caption:** Dr. W.P. Woods was elected the first president of Lions Clubs International in 1917.

For the past century, Lions around the world have been willing to meet the call to lead their fellow members. Whether at the club level or the board level, Lions international presidents help set a vision of service and do whatever it takes to enable the association to thrive.

Dr. W.P. Woods, a physician from Evansville, Indiana, was elected the new association's first international president in 1917 at the first Lions Clubs International



Convention. Lions also elected a first vice president and second vice president, and ever since, the vice president positions have helped prepare future leaders for the responsibilities and rigors of the office.

Serving as the president of the world's largest service organization is an honor, but it is also a challenge. The international president travels the globe almost the entire year, visiting clubs, attending board meetings, speaking with dignitaries and bringing attention to special projects, among many other activities. "I think I traveled about 330 days," Past International President Dr. Tae-Sup Lee from South Korea said of his year in office, 2003 to 2004, which focused on building up membership numbers.

Efforts to visit clubs strengthen the bonds of friendship and keep Lions connected. Seeing firsthand the scale of Lions' programs and their impact on individuals is also life-changing.

"I once used the terminology that we were improving the quality of life for a lot of people," said Past International President Jim Ervin from Albany, Georgia, who served from 1999 to 2000. "I didn't really know and understand what that meant until I began to travel and see the real quality of life—that we were making a difference with people." Ervin, who resided in the same Lions district as former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, was instrumental in connecting Lions with the Carter Center and Pfizer to launch a SightFirst initiative against river blindness.

Lions' leaders have emerged from every background imaginable. Johnny Balbo from LaGrange, Illinois, who served as international president from 1974 to 1975, was once a professional wrestler known as "The Great Balbo." João Fernando Sobral, who served from 1976 to 1977, was a university professor from Sao Paulo, Brazil. Brian Stevenson, a judge from Calgary, Alberta, Canada, served as international president from 1987 to 1988, while Sid L. Scruggs III from Vass, North Carolina, a retired military and commercial airline pilot, served from 2010 to 2011.



Most presidents have come from the United States, and many hail from the Midwest where Lions got its start. The town of Wichita, Kansas, holds the distinction of providing three Lions presidents—Charles Hatton (1932-33), Claude De Vorss (1964-65) and Dr. William Wunder (1995-96). But as Lions has expanded globally, so have its leaders. Members from New Zealand to Chile, Italy to Thailand have led Lions Clubs. Four presidents have come from Canada. Brazil, India, France, and Sweden have each had two of their citizens become president.

In many ways, the international president is a service position for life. Past international presidents have a wealth of knowledge and experience to share, and they continue to chair committees, visit clubs and offer guidance long past their official terms. The immediate past president also serves as the chairperson of Lions Clubs International Foundation the year following the presidency.

For all their efforts, past, present and future, Lions have only one thing to say: “Thank you!”