

# OUR CLUBS

## VIRTUAL VISIT

### A focus on research

Rotary Club of North Chicago, Illinois

As a psychology student, Jacques-René Hébert shadowed a professional psychologist at clinical sessions, gleaned insights into the treatment of post-traumatic stress among fellow military veterans. But it was attending the psychologist's Rotary club meetings that opened another important avenue for professional development: an opportunity to practice presenting his research to an audience, a critical skill for students in the sciences.

"It gave me a venue to speak publicly and to articulate what we were doing in therapy, and our work with veterans, in a way that could be understood by people outside of the field," says Hébert, a former U.S. Marine who served during the Iraq War. "You can't speak in psychobabble; you have to translate concepts and ideas in a way that is salient to people."

Hébert is one of 18 psychology and psychiatry students whose academic research has been supported by the Rotary Club of North Chicago. The club gives students opportunities to present their work before a friendly audience and awards them

stipends of \$300 to \$600 to present their research at national or international conferences where they make contacts and learn from experts.

Some of the North Chicago club's interest in trauma research stems from its proximity to Naval Station Great Lakes and a military health facility, the Lovell Federal Health Care Center, which serves active-duty personnel and veterans. A half dozen of the club's 19 members are veterans, including Angela Walker, a 2022-23 assistant governor for District 6440, who was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. "The research being done [at Lovell] has been essential in helping me understand my PTSD," Walker says.

The club's support of psychology students started with club member John Bair, an associate clinical professor of psychology and psychiatry at Rosalind Franklin University in North Chicago. Bair has established himself as an expert in post-traumatic stress disorder, working with veterans at the Lovell center. Bair worked with Walker to co-found the club's initiative in 2012.

Many of the students supported by the club have gone on to build careers as psychotherapists in the fields of trauma and traumatic brain injury. "You cannot overestimate the value of these conferences," says Bair. "This is where you first start to establish your professional identity. It's one thing to do a lit review, another to go and hear people talk about the most current studies."

That was the case for Hébert, who was in his third year as a doctoral student in Chicago when he became involved in

Bair's research. The club gave him a stipend to attend the annual convention of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies in 2018. "To say this support was significant is an understatement; opportunities for early-career psychologists to present their work is vital to their professional development," recalls Hébert, who is now a staff psychologist at the Tomah Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Wisconsin.

Katherine Nimrod joined Bair's research team during an internship at the Lovell center while earning her master's at Loyola University Chicago. The club gave her a stipend to attend the American Psychological Association convention last year in Minneapolis. "I was able to be around people I wanted to learn from," says Nimrod, now a therapist in the Chicago suburbs. "You feel like you're in a place where you belong. These are people you look up to as mentors. It inspired me to work harder."

That conference also made a big difference for Emily Sproule, who had worked on her doctorate in clinical psychology while volunteering with veterans in North Chicago. Her volunteer work put her in contact with Bair, and she became one of his mentees, coming to club meetings. She was awarded a stipend for the conference.

"It was an opportunity of a lifetime," says Sproule, who began working with veterans to honor her grandfather, an Army major who served in Korea and Vietnam. He died of exposure to Agent Orange when she was young. "I wanted to carry on his legacy. At the conference, you get to make connections with other



Members of the Rotary Club of North Chicago (from left): John Bair, Angela Walker, Devin Stieber, Joan Battley, Kevin Stevens, and Danny Spungen.

people and find out what you have in common. Many of them were working with the military."

Many of the students the club has supported have been involved in Bair's research into moral injury and moral distress, an emerging field in trauma studies. Moral injury and moral distress refer to the effects of guilt and shame on individuals who have taken actions that go against their moral convictions. A common example is a military operation that results in civilian casualties.

"These issues are bigger than veterans," says Hébert. "These are issues experienced by first responders or anyone who has lived through trauma and then has to deal with the psychological aftermath of trying to make sense of the world now that they know this terrible thing can happen."

A recent study by Bair, Nimrod, Sproule, and others identifies and details 26 sub-themes of moral injury and moral distress drawn from interviews with veterans of wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Nimrod continues to present findings of that research with Bair at Rotary clubs.

The North Chicago club's focus has helped keep its members engaged. Danny Spungen joined the club because his business is in nearby Waukegan. He was attracted by the club's diversity and finds the student presentations fascinating.

"It's a tremendous opportunity for them. They get to present before veterans, so they get a lot of good feedback," he says. "Unfortunately, the need is growing. These students may end up training therapists in other countries, like Ukraine."

— ARNOLD R. GRAHL

## A DECADE OF SUPPORTING STUDENTS

For more than a decade, the Rotary Club of North Chicago has supported research addressing post-traumatic stress disorder, moral injury, and traumatic brain injury. The club has assisted 18 psychology and psychiatry students, providing them opportunities to present their research to Rotary clubs and at professional conferences.

The experience has helped students complete advanced degree programs and move on to careers in clinical practice, higher education, substance use counseling, and the military.

### How the club does it:

- Partners with a nonprofit to access funding
- Holds fundraisers
- Networks with other clubs in its district

Photograph by Jeff Marini



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