

# Altadena Rotary lauds 'service above self'



From left at the breakfast May 31 are Rotary Club President Brad Roeber; Supervisor Kathryn Barger; Mark Mariscal, recipient of Rotary International's Service Above Self Award; and Lisa Richard, Rotary president-elect. Jonny K. Yachi Nice On Tours Inc

When is a pancake breakfast more than flapjacks and coffee? When the

hosts are Altadena Rotary, and the place is the town they live to serve.

On May 31, the service club, founded in 1949, welcomed all to the free event held at Grocery Outlet on Lake Avenue, the heart of many an Altadena gathering before and since the deadly Eaton fire. Grocery Outlet's owners, Jose and Sandra Valenzuela, are longtime Rotarians, and proof of the club's "Service Above Self" motto.

They were there with Supervisor Kathryn Barger and club President Brad Roeber to do the pancake breakfast proud, but also to celebrate Mark Mariscal, past president of Altadena Rotary, president of the Altadena Library Foundation, and wearer of so many hats in Rotary and Altadena I can't list them all here. (Well, I can, but I would use up my word count.)

Mariscal received the Service Above Self Award from Rotary International on April 25 in Chula Vista. It is the highest honor that Rotary International can give.

And now I hear Mariscal loudly proclaiming, "Enough about that!" — but allow me to at least record that he joined L.A.'s Rotary Club, the fifth-oldest in the world, in 2000, and its Altadena group in 2016, after his retirement from the Los Angeles Parks and Recreation Department.

And among the accolades as news of the honor spread, Meredith Miller, owner of the iconic Webster's Pharmacy, called Mariscal a great gift to Altadena.

Herb Agner said Mariscal was the face of the town's summer concerts to him when he and his family first moved to Altadena. Agner, of course, also went on to join the Rotary.

The Mariscals' home along Loma Alta Drive was destroyed in the Eaton

fire, along with the homes of 15 other Rotarians, but that didn't stop any of them from stepping up in the hours immediately after, or in the 500-plus days since the inferno. Another 10 or so Rotarians suffered minor to major smoke damage to their homes.

To date, not a single Rotary member has had his or her home totally rebuilt, Mariscal said, though most are rebuilding.

Two members are still trying to remediate their smoke-damaged homes.

Since the fire, the club received more than 2,500 individual donations from across the country to help support community within the Eaton fire damage in and around Altadena, totaling more than \$1 million last year.

“We distributed more than \$550,000 by December 2025. Additionally, we held three big giveaway events in 2025 where we brought in local nonprofit partners and distributed more than \$600,000 worth of donated items,” Mariscal said. “Our club leadership knew right away that since we had just celebrated our 75th anniversary in early 2024, our club was known as an action group that believes in service above self. Our club was one of the first 10 or so organizations to start meeting at the Elks Lodge to try and figure out what would be needed immediately, over the short term (1-3 years) and the long term.”

Altadena Rotary hasn't stopped.

A small grant from both the Pasadena Community Foundation and California Community Foundation in 2026 and 2027 allowed the club to put on at least four pancake community gatherings, a vital way to bring displaced families back to town, if even for just a few hours.

It allocated \$175,000 to support small grants from \$1,000 to \$5,000 to

organizations providing direct service to the Altadena community.

Last summer, although thinking it would not happen, the club was able to pull off the 28th annual Summer Concert Series in July and August. The club had taken over the production and operations of the summer concert series at Farnsworth in 2017.

“Instead of holding it at the burned-down Amphitheater at Farnsworth Park, we partnered with L.A. County Parks and Recreation and were able to hold the concert series at Loma Alta Park, the lower half near the tennis courts,” Mariscal said, a feat they hope to do again kicking off on July 11 and running for seven consecutive Saturdays.

Altadena Rotary has started the process of using some of the funds raised to continue giving grants and committed \$100,000 to help with the rebuilding of the Farnsworth Amphitheater and the Ball Fields at Farnsworth, both projects getting \$50,000.

And the donations from the breakfast will benefit Altadena Mountain Rescue Team and Christmas Tree Lane.

The club was operating at warp speed before the Eaton fire decimated the town and changed the trajectory of their work. It awarded scholarships to about 15 high school students from Pasadena Unified School District schools, doing the same for four veterans attending Pasadena City College and for 14 or so other Lancers.

It gave small grants of up to \$1,000 to local nonprofits providing programs to local Altadenans and supported teachers with 15-25 minigrants to help their work at seven PUSD schools that have majority of Altadena students.

Altadena Rotary members volunteer at two to three local events produced by other groups such as Christmas Tree Lane, Altadena Library and the parks department. It also supports student competitions at Muir High School in music, essay writing and speech.

All this to say, the Altadena Rotary Club members aren't resting on their pancake breakfast laurels, or that distinguished Service Above Self Award. They're moving on to planning the summer concert series mainly, Mariscal and Roeber, Sandra and Jose Valenzuela and other Rotarians such as René Amy, founder of the Great Altadena Poppy Project.

I have had, quite fortunately, a wonderful front-row seat to witness their work and heartbreak and frustration, their behind-the-scenes toil and cheerful-loud leadership anywhere Altadenans gather now, and get to know each (their survive-and-flourish energy, defiant defense of their hometown and insistence on helping and doing something good).

Altadena Rotary is still here, and it is almost summer and we are tuning up for outdoor concerts and we are talking about service, and talking about the deep and messy love: of a place and a people still in need and still on the mend.

That's all it comes back to anyway, and everything.