

WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S \$4.5 MILLION

BY TRICIA LOTT

KEVIN HILGERS set a lofty goal for his year as district governor: He wanted to raise \$1 million for The Rotary Foundation. In the end, he led an event that raised \$4.5 million.

In 2012-13, Hilgers served as governor of District 5370 (parts of Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Northwest Territories). In May, about a month before he finished his term, Hilgers hosted what he called the "Million Dollar Dinner."

The dinner used a fundraising model that the district hadn't tried before: Organizers asked Rotarians to include the Foundation in their wills and estate plans as an alternative to outright cash contributions. "In other words, to become a member of the Foundation's Bequest Society," Hilgers explains.

To receive an invitation to the dinner, donors had to give at least \$10,000 in their estate plans, the minimum for Bequest Society membership. Several people donated \$250,000 or more through their wills.

Hilgers began marketing the event months in advance while speaking at Rotary gatherings, and he used the district's Facebook page to inspire mem-

bers to give. He and Carolyn Ferguson, the Foundation's regional major gifts officer serving Canada, worked together to secure donations.

As an added draw, Hilgers invited a special guest of honour: Sakuji Tanaka, then serving as RI president.

"Having an anchor for the fundraiser such as President Tanaka played a key role in building excitement," says Ross Tyson, District 5370 Rotary Foundation chair and past district governor.

The organizing committee also sought advice from neighbouring District 5360 (parts of Alberta and Saskatchewan), which had raised about \$2 million using a similar model a few months earlier.

"The biggest challenge was marketing the fundraiser to all the clubs in such an expansive district," says Don Lowry, chair of the dinner committee.

Hilgers' expert outreach skills, combined with those of other well-connected planners on the team, made the task more manageable. "Personal contacts were important," Lowry says.

Organizers made the donation process as easy as pos-



Kevin Hilgers (left) invited Past RI President Sakuji Tanaka to attend the dinner, bolstering the district's fundraiser for the Foundation.

sible, asking interested donors to fill out an online form that then went to Ferguson, who worked out the remaining details of their gifts personally.

Darrel and Edith Martin, of St. Albert, Alta., donated through their will and say they enjoyed meeting Tanaka at the dinner. "We consider ourselves lifetime Rotarians," says Edith, a mem-

ber of the Rotary Club of Edmonton Northeast. Her husband has been a member of the same club since 1995. "Contributing to health and literacy and basic necessities for people in need is important to us," she adds. But ultimately, their decision to give came down to a simple reason: "Rotary has opened the world to us."