

Area boasts a cornucopia of Kiwanians

By [Mike Grizzard](#)
The Daily Reflector

Saturday, April 05, 2008

With hands conducting and baritone voice booming, Les Garner stands before a weekly meeting of University City Kiwanis, leading the singing of "God Bless America." Then he turns, faces an American flag and, with hand over heart, joins a room full of fellow Kiwanians in the Pledge of Allegiance.

It's a ritual he's followed nearly every week since he started the club in 1972. The camaraderie and friendships keep the 88-year-old Greenville resident coming back. He also often drops in on meetings among the 10 other clubs of which he is an honorary member.



Rhett Butler/The Daily Reflector

Les Garner says the Pledge of Allegiance during a Kiwanis meeting at the Masonic Lodge in Greenville.

Their mission — serving the children of the world — is what motivates him to keep drumming up support.

An invitation from a neighbor in 1967 got him involved.

"They had helped my son, Les Jr., be a community ambassador," Garner said. "I was so impressed by what they meant to children. I asked how to become a member."

For 40 years, he's been more than a member. He's been "Mr. Kiwanis."

Since his induction in 1968, Garner has been a Kiwanian of the Year (1971), organized and served as charter president of University City Kiwanis (1972), and held positions of lieutenant governor (1974-75) and governor of the Carolinas District. He chartered 13 clubs as lieutenant governor, 13 more as governor and had a hand in organizing more than 50 clubs overall.

"He really built a lot of clubs here and planted the seeds for everything," said Louis Clark Jr., lieutenant governor of Division 17, which is comprised of Pitt and Beaufort counties.

The division has 11 clubs and is organizing a 12th in Bethel. The membership total of 480 ranks the division among the highest per-capita for Kiwanis nationwide.

"As a division, we are probably one of the more active and robust," Clark said. "My challenge as the leader is having to fill some big shoes of the people that have come before me and have been leaders in Kiwanis in this area.

"It sets the bar high, but it's great. That's how we're able to do more, too."



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Les Garner, right, buys a raffle ticket before a Kiwanis Club meeting at the Masonic Lodge in Greenville.

Innovation has been vital in creating opportunities to accommodate most any schedule, from early-morning to

early-evening meetings throughout the week. And though all-male clubs still exist, Greenville established the first all-female club in 1987 and also has clubs with members of both genders.

"When I was lieutenant governor, I went to clubs and said, 'Listen, we're no longer an old, white man's club.' We've preached diversity," said Todd Siebels, a University City Kiwanis member.

Garner founded University City Kiwanis in 1972 after a visit to a club in Indiana.

When Greenville Kiwanis, which met in the evening, reached its maximum of 75 members, Garner pushed for a lunchtime group.

University City is now the largest club in the division with about 120 members.

Garner also organized Kiwanis International's first Golden K Club in 1975 for ages 55 and older. Greenville now has two Golden K clubs for men and a Golden K Jewels for women.

Among other local clubs are the Pitt County Professionals for young business professionals and the Aktion Club for special-needs adults.

"It's incredible how many folks are involved in these clubs," said Kathryn Lennox, a member of the Greater Greenville Club since 2006.

Visiting clubs to promote Kiwanis One Day, an international service event scheduled for today, has given Lennox an insight into the prevalence of Kiwanis in the area.

"They're all very unique, but yet they all have the same mission, and we're all working toward the same goal," Lennox said. "There's really a place for everybody."

Especially seniors, Garner said, and he considers giving those in retirement an avenue to serve among his top contributions. Garner, a war veteran and former Greenville mayor, ran a wholesale business for nearly 40 years. He retired in 1990.

"As I look back, I don't know of anything I could have done for humanity any better than having a part of starting this Golden Kiwanis Club," said Garner. "... They have time to do the service work."

Greenville's Golden K Club celebrated its 25th anniversary in March, honoring Garner and fellow charter members Beverly Congleton, John Reddington and Al Stox. Club President Bob Schnellenberger said serving the community and country has deep roots for those in his generation.

"Most of us came from pretty humble beginnings," Schnellenberger said. "Most of us helped with the World War effort. ... It was a war that touched all of us. Some of us participated in the Korean Conflict and some in the Vietnam Conflict.

"We're an organization that has a strong connection to serving this country. ... I'm really proud to be associated with this group of men who are selfless in their dedication to youth and the community."

The Kiwanis influence is visible locally, from Terrific Kids bumper stickers to dictionaries for every Pitt and Beaufort third-grader and a book for every Pitt County first-grader.

Kiwanis seeks to build leadership skills through K Kids in elementary schools, Builders Club in middle schools, and Key Club, a leadership development program in high schools. Programs have been

established in a handful of schools, but Clark said building Kiwanis membership is crucial to keep pace with a growing population and provide more opportunities.

"We're looking to grow, but we're not looking to grow to help Kiwanis, we're looking to grow to help our community and help our children," Clark said. "Kiwanis has very specific programs that can really help students in school.

"There's some gaps we need to fill, and part of that is we need to increase our membership. I think one of the biggest opportunities is in our seniors. ... There's going to be more people in that demographic, and they have more time. To me that's an exciting thing. It's a way the senior community can give back and use their expertise."

Siebels said he found "a large pool of giving hearts here in this area" that has been willing to get involved in community service.

"We're very fortunate," Siebels said. "I think a lot of it has to do with some of the leadership we've had in place. They're not afraid to get involved, and it started with Les Garner.

"What we believe is when you help a child, you literally help the world. What I mean by that is if we can have a positive influence on a child, maybe 15 or 20 years from now, they may, through that influence, open up a homeless shelter, or maybe be teacher of the year, or develop even a cure for cancer.

"That's why we feel if you help that child that's in need, you increase their opportunity to be successful in life."

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