



# THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

February 10, 2026

## 2025-2026 Board Members

President Patrick Baker  
Pres Elect Bill Bartee  
Past Pres Kim Brattain  
Secretary Bill Gill  
Treasurer Craig Field  
Exec Dir Christine Cipriano

### Directors 2024-2026

Benton Bragg  
John Cantrell  
Tish Atkins Charles  
Dena Diorio  
Jesse Hite  
Virginia Owen

### Directors 2025-2027

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Karen Calder  
J Hill  
Ayo Johnson  
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Michael Orzech  
Robert Shaw  
Elizabeth Teagarden  
Mike Wollinger

### Membership Co-Chairs:

Linwood Bolles &  
Shelley Dean

### Programs

Elizabeth Teagarden



## THE MAN OF THE HOUR ~ RICHARD A. VINROOT

by Marilyn Bowler

Each year Charlotte Rotary honors an individual who has earned the club's prestigious *Excellence In Leadership Award* and during the course of the Award presentation the honoree is given the microphone to address the membership. And so it was on Tuesday when the superb **Richard Vinroot** was named winner and was given an enthusiastic/rousing standing ovation by the ballroom filled with Vinroot fans.

**David Zimmerman**, as Chair of the Selection Committee, began the program by thanking his committee and The Business Journal (sponsor of the annual Award) and then recognizing former Award winners in attendance, including **Dr. Tony Zeiss**, **Tony Marciano**, **Luther Fincher**, **Dena Diorio** and Jane McIntyre. Although former Award winner, Pat McCrory was unable to join us, he sent a heartfelt note of congratulations to Richard referring to him as "an ultimate leader whose name should be on the Charlotte Convention Center."

As a special treat, Matt Doherty ~ UNC basketball great who helped Dean Smith win his first national championship in 1982 and then became assistant coach under Davidson's Bob McKillop, followed by his head coaching jobs at Notre Dame, UNC, Florida Atlantic and SMU ~ took the MIC to introduce his close friend who happens to be this year's recipient ... Richard A. Vinroot.

Richard demonstrated amazing leadership skills even as a youth. From earning his Eagle Scout award; to serving as Student Body President at East Mecklenburg High School; to being East Meck's Captain of both the football and

basketball teams; to being named a Morehead Scholar and attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, all while holding the office of President of both his Junior and Senior Class ... in Matt's words, "Richard 's commitment to service was amazing."

After earning his Juris Doctorate at Chapel Hill, Richard joined the Army during the Vietnam War, serving in the 1st Signal Brigade. Once again, he distinguished himself by being awarded the Bronze Star Medal before returning home to Charlotte to build his highly successful legal career with the firm of (then) Fleming, Robinson & Bradshaw (now) Robinson, Bradshaw & Hinson.

A fully-committed public servant, Richard served on the City Council from 1983-1991 and as Mayor of Charlotte from 1991-1995 during which time he helped bring the NFL to Charlotte. He has championed the implementation of Charter Schools along with transportation issues and legal ethics. The list is lengthy.

Charlotte Rotary President **Patrick Baker** then stepped to the MIC to present Richard with the 2026 Excellence In Leadership Award after which Patrick read aloud quotes from some of the many notes he had received in regard to Richard's acclaim, including words of praise from **David Erdman**, **Mark Turner** and **Bryan Adams**. Patrick concluded his remarks by sharing that Richard's treatment of Patrick from the time they met has been one of respect and friendship and he spoke those words "from my heart."

At that point it was a special treat for us to have the incredible Chris William of PBS fame and host of "Carolina Business Review" with us to interview Richard and ask his thoughts on an interesting variety of topics. Chris' first question was in regard to what makes good government and, in typical Richard Vinroot style, Richard immediately gave credit to others whom he stated were and are impactful when it comes to spearheading and implementing good government. He specifically named **Velva Woollen** and **Carla DuPuy** within his response, which also included so many of the past Excellence In Leadership Award winners and gave a shout-out to current Mayor Vi Lyles.

Chris' next question focused on how things have changed in government in the past thirty years and, with incredible candor, Richard replied, "I think they've changed in a way that makes me sad. I don't think they treat each other with the respect and dignity that I felt my peers treated me, even when wrong, over the years. Harvey Gantt and I talk a good deal about how kind we thought each of us was to the other even when we were on different sides of the Republican-Democratic line, and even when we disagreed about one thing or the other." Richard expanded on the topic to the delight and approval of the audience who clearly appreciated his thinking and his honest assessment.

The program was then opened to Q&A from the audience. **Tony Zeiss** asked Richard to name two or three of the most meaningful things in which he was involved and of which he was proud. Richard immediately spoke of the roll-out garbage can regulation. A big change that saved workers time and city funds (@ \$20 million).

**Susie Masotti** commended Richard for referencing aloud the discontent we have in our country which starts at the top and kind-of rolls down. Is there someone, Susie asked, that excites you and that you'd like to see come forward to run for office? Richard responded that there's a Senator from Pennsylvania named John Fetterman who speaks the truth and takes the position of doing the right thing and saying the right thing on a regular basis. And he said he hears good things about a Democrat named Andy Beshear who's the Governor of Kentucky and he seems to appeal to more than just one party.

**Herb Harriss** brought up Richard's start-up of Sugar Creek Charter School on North Tryon Street. Richard immediately included others who were instrumental in that effort, including **Velva Woollen**, Frank Martin and Ron Leeper. Although there were powerful detractors, Richard and his cohorts put the first Charter School in the middle of the city where there were some pretty tough kids. The result tells the story: "Sugar Creek Charter School has sent the last seven senior classes to college, every single one of them. It has 1,800 mostly minority kids with a waiting list of 700 kids. It's a star among all of the public schools in Charlotte." The Spanglers and others have supported "Project Lyft," as we call it.

Richard then shared his philosophy of why charter schools are so beneficial to our school system. "I think it's the competition. And maybe that's the secret of America ...free enterprise and competition." He added, "It's a hard job teaching children but it's the most important thing we do or don't do in the country for the long haul."

In response to Amanda Nitto's request, Richard told about the day he spent with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as the time he and his wife, Judy Vinroot were in our sister city Bao Ding when there was the infamous shooting in Tiananmen Square. Richard was there and told us that the story that our Army started the shooting was completely false. Indeed, our Army did not. The fact is that the students or the crowd started it.

Taylor Batten asked Richard what he'd consider the single biggest problem facing Charlotte today. Richard circled back around to public education. We must educate our children in order for America to compete internationally. Another vital issue is transportation, in particular public transit as well as speed limits in highly traveled roads in Charlotte. He noted the Colony Road dispute, and he believes the City Council decision to reduce the speed on Colony was a wrong decision and, to his supreme credit, he's unafraid to say so. (And he's right!)

In closing, **Phil Volponi** asked Richard if the Founding Fathers were coming back, what does Richard think they would be telling us as pieces of advice? Once again, Richard pointed out the value of treating each other with respect and talking things out ...maintaining respectful relationships between leaders and people who like and respect each other and want to do the right thing. He cited his many conversations with Mayor Vi Lyles (who was with us at the meeting on Tuesday.) She and Richard belong to different political parties but have a good and respectful relationship with each other. "Maybe we need to go back to at-large elections. Maybe we need to have the whole city decide who the leaders of our city will be."

Richard Vinroot spoke so many words of wisdom, and it clearly resounded with Charlotte Rotary members. The phrase, "the best meeting we've had in a long time" was heard often among the large audience.

Richard, we look forward to a return visit from our Excellence In Leadership winner this year!

Below are the recordings of the meeting:

With Slides: <https://vimeo.com/1163797867?fl=pl&fe=sh>

Without Slides: <https://vimeo.com/1163798150?fl=pl&fe=sh>

Introduction of the Excellence in Leadership Award Program begins at approximately 12 minutes and 20 seconds.

Photos of the event can be found here: <https://flic.kr/s/aHBqjCKtd1>

Additional information can also be found on our webpage here: [300 Excellence in Leadership Award | Rotary Club of Charlotte](#)