

Rotary Youth Exchange nurtured a global curiosity for tech executive

By **Erin Gartner**

Hélène Barnekow spent her career leading teams at the forefront of emerging technologies, from the advent of mobile phones to cloud computing to the data centers powering artificial intelligence. Yet here she was talking whiskey. “I’m not even a big whiskey drinker!” she says.

After stepping down as CEO of Microsoft Sweden in 2022, Barnekow found herself researching a small distillery in western Norway on the island of Fedje. Founded by a woman whose ethos is to empower female investors, the distillery is fully financed by women. It was just the kind of startup Barnekow was looking to get behind. “So that’s how I ended up a whiskey investor,” she says with a laugh.

Barnekow is embracing new ventures as she shifts from a 30-year career in executive leadership to angel investing, which involves providing early-stage capital to startups, often in return for equity ownership. She brings with her a wealth of corporate leadership and international experience, having lived around the world, from England to Singapore to the U.S., and having navigated fast-moving business environments, often as the only woman in the room. In this latest role, her focus is on companies making positive social change.



“It was life-changing, it really was,” Hélène Barnekow says of her Youth Exchange year.

Image credit: Christian Aslund

“It’s very fulfilling when you know you can make a difference, and you don’t have to sacrifice your business or your results to do that,” she says. “It’s more fun when you can do both. That was always a very strong driving force for me.”

Barnekow grew up in the small town of Kävlinge in southern Sweden, and long before her global career, it was a [Rotary Youth Exchange](#) experience that first took her beyond Europe at age 17. She lived for a year in the U.S. with a couple and their four children in New York. Barnekow became close with the family, soaking in the culture — 24-hour cable television, MTV, late-night pizza delivery — and generous praise for her soccer skills. And she enjoyed meeting fellow exchange students from around the world.

“It was life-changing, it really was,” she says. “I had grown up knowing relatives from different countries, and I learned French and English early. But the town I lived in was very homogenous. I was always curious about what was going on outside Sweden. After that year in the U.S., I was convinced that I wanted to do something internationally, to work in different cultures.”

Barnekow’s older brother stayed with the same New York family for a year, and the family’s daughter Erin spent two summers in Sweden with the Barnekows. “We just all meshed,” says Erin Welling. She and Barnekow were even in each other’s weddings. “She and I, we were truly like sisters.”

Four decades later, the families remain close, exchanging visits. “It’s the biggest blessing that we’re still in each other’s lives,” Barnekow says. The admiration is mutual. “We’re just so impressed,” says her former host father, Roger Triftshauser, beaming with fatherly pride. “The thrill of knowing what she’s done, and what she continues to do, is just mind-boggling for us.”

Back home in Sweden, Barnekow studied international business, and by the early 1990s, she found a role with a distributor for Microsoft, marking her first foray into technology. She was hooked. “I remember this vividly, thinking, ‘Oh my gosh, there’s so much happening here. This is completely going to change how we communicate, how we can work, educate, and teach.’”

She joined Swedish telecom giant Ericsson in 1995, and just two years later was named to her first executive role. “I was the first woman to get promoted into a leadership position,” she says. “They said, ‘We’re so happy. We want more women, but we can’t find them.’ They weren’t looking in the right places.”

As she built her team, Barnekow put together lists of qualified candidates, both women and men, by searching different networks. “I ended up with 50 percent women, and I’m very proud of that,” she says. “This is a business challenge. We often think about it as a challenge for women, but we need to redefine it: You’re optimizing for business, and you want to make sure you’re looking at the whole talent pool.”

She adds: “My boss later said, ‘I don’t know what you’re doing, but you’re doing it right. Everyone wants to work with you.’”

Barnekow maintained that recruitment ethos throughout her career, which led her to become CEO of Microsoft Sweden in 2018. During her tenure, the company launched a data center hub powered by 100 percent renewable energy to be part of Microsoft’s Azure cloud computing network and committed to providing digital skills training to tens of thousands of Swedish workers. She remained CEO until 2022. “I’ve had so many fun jobs,” she says. And influential ones: Barnekow was recently honored by the king of Sweden for her contribution to Swedish business.

Hélène Barnekow

- Rotary Youth Exchange student, 1982-83
- Tech executive, Ericsson, Sony Ericsson, EMC, Telia Sweden, 1990s-2010s
- CEO, Microsoft Sweden, 2018-22



During Barnekow’s tenure at Microsoft Sweden, the company launched a data center hub powered by 100 percent renewable energy.

Courtesy of Hélène Barnekow

Barnekow now coaches CEOs and serves on several corporate boards, including as chairwoman of Storytel, an audiobook and e-book platform, and Mindler, a health care startup that provides online therapy for young people in Europe.

She also supports Nordic Angels, an initiative to increase capital for startups in the region. And along with the Feddie Ocean Distillery in Norway, Barnekow’s recent investments include X Shore, a maker of electric boats that aims to reduce carbon emissions, and the Buddy Company, a clothing brand that promotes friendship and community.

As the tech industry continues to evolve, her advice for the next generation is to be curious and focus on education but also take time to find the right professional fit. She notes that it took her a few tries.

“Think about your life as a constant journey. It’s your responsibility to understand what technology does to your life: How do I learn coding? How do I learn about ChatGPT? How do I acquire those skills? That’s your own responsibility. So always have that learning path with you, all through your life. You can never stop learning.”

And always give back: “We have the responsibility to be a good citizen. When you have the privilege of being able to do more, to have some kind of impact, do it.”

This story originally appeared in the October 2025 issue of [Rotary](#) magazine.

Exchanges for students ages 15-19 are sponsored by Rotary clubs in more than 100 countries.

[LEARN MORE](#)

RELATED STORIES

[A Rotary Scholar’s book inspires children: Janet Chvatal](#)

[Peace on earth begins with peace of mind: Jean Best](#)

[Retired exec profits from empowering others: Stella Dongo](#)

Please help us improve. Was this page helpful?

[YES](#)

[NO](#)

[About Rotary](#) [Get Involved](#) [Our Causes](#) [Our Programs](#) [News & Features](#) [For Members](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Change Language](#)



© 2025 Rotary International. All rights reserved. [Privacy Policy](#) [Terms of Use](#)

