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Northfield Rotary: The fight to eradicate polio

By CHARLIE COGAN Guest Columnist

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Cogan

October 24 is World Polio Day. In 1988, as the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) launched, there were 350,000 cases of polio in 125 countries across the globe. Today, there are less than ten wild polio cases in only two countries: Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is something to be proud of and people in Northfield have played a role in this effort. There is still work to be done to finish the job.

In 2003, Jim Pokorney, Brett Reese and I were in Ghana and Togo for polio eradication work, and to represent the Rotary Club of Northfield at the inauguration of the new serology laboratory at the Yendube Children's Hospital in Dapaong, a city in the far north.

Rotary International is one of the four founding partners of the GPEI, with the World Health Organization-WHO, UNICEF, and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). That laboratory is for another letter, but the three of us were also part of a team of five Rotarians who participated in the National Immunization Days in December, when millions of children across West Africa were vaccinated against polio and given Vitamin A supplements.

The next year, Brett and I were joined by Rick Estenson and twelve other Rotarians from across the USA for another campaign, this one including the measles vaccine (provided by the Red Cross). Since we returned, we have worked on many fronts to support PolioPlus, Rotary's arm of the GPEI.

In 2005, Richard Maus came to present to our club. He had just written a book about his own life with polio, "The Lucky One: Making it Past Polio and Despair", and he joined the club soon after.

His book was featured in the Rotarian magazine and Richard toured District 5960 to share his life story and put thousands of miles on his car and motivated hundreds of Rotarians to support the cause.

In 2012, he was recognized by The Rotary Foundation with the "Regional Service Award for a Polio-Free World", awarded by the trustees of The Rotary Foundation to no more than 10 people each year in the Americas Region of the World Health Organization (WHO). When he received this award, he said that every Rotarian should ask themselves, "Where was I when we were fighting polio?"

The Rotary Club of Northfield is a busy group. We are active in climate action, youth exchange, community service, international service, and we host the Jesse James Bike Tour, the Turkey Trot, and the 4-Way Taste every year to raise funds to support these and other worthy causes.

Polio eradication is just one of our areas of focus, but it is Rotary International's Number One Priority. Since 2008, when the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation decided to match every dollar raised by Rotarians two to one to finish our polio work, the Northfield club has contributed over \$100,000 (second in the district) to the cause, part of an effort from the 63 clubs in District 5960 that has raised and contributed over \$2 million since 2008.

The original GPEI partners were joined in 2008 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and more recently by GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance. Many hands make for light work and there is a very real chance that polio can be only the second disease ever eradicated, after Smallpox.

As the case in New York City last year showed, the disease is still highly contagious and vaccination rates across the globe need to be kept at high levels until three years beyond the last detected case. If you'd like to learn more or would like to contribute to this cause, check endpolio.org.

Charlie Cogan is the Northfield Rotary Foundation director. Brett Reese, Jim Pokorney, Rick Estenson and Richard Maus also contributed to this letter.

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