

National Immunization Day, India, February 11, 2007

At the end of September 2006, the District Foundation Committee's PolioPlus team, led by Kelly Sastre, began looking seriously into the possibility of participating in a PolioPlus Partner's National Immunization Day (NID). After researching and talking with others around the country, an opportunity was identified and the call went out in December for District 6990 volunteers. Two stepped forward – Bill Coffman, President of the **Rotary Club of Miami Beach**, and Noelle Galperin, daughter of District Rotary Foundation Committee Chair Arnold Galperin. Below, Bill shares his experience with us:

What does the spark of a childhood dream, snuffed out before it has a chance to ignite, sound like?

What does abject poverty taste like?

What does the desperation of a parent, unable to provide for his or her children, sound like?

Before you consider these questions as nonsensical, consider India. Like these questions, it is a country of contradictions. The largest democracy in the world struggles with polio, poverty, religious strife, unsanitary conditions, and unimaginable pollution. Yet, the people of India are beautiful, compassionate, spiritual, full of energy, and possess a vigor that is the envy of the world.

During the week of February 11, 2007, Rotary, The World Health Organization, UNICEF and Indian healthcare workers immunized 172,000,000 children under the age of five against polio. This was done by a combination of manning polio booths on February 11, and going door to door, bus to bus, train to train during the remainder of the week. More than 204,000,000 houses were visited by 2.3 million healthcare workers. And yet, polio remains an endemic disease in the northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. What is also remarkable is that India will conduct at least one more National Immunization Day, possibly two, this year as well as conducting several supplemental immunization days (SNIDs). You see, in India dysentery is so prevalent that children must be immunized 15 to 20 times before they achieve a resistance to polio. Quite literally, drops that go into the mouth come out the back end before achieving the desired effect.

Rotarians in India are tired. They're tired of polio, they're tired of the effect polio has on their children and, most importantly, they're tired of fighting polio. At the same time, they know they can't give up. In the fight against polio, there is no second place. You win or you lose. It's that simple.

In America, we don't see the child who doesn't attend school because his spine is so badly twisted by polio he can neither walk nor sit upright. Beggars don't drag themselves across the pavement seeking a few rupees so that they might have a bite to eat. For us – for me – polio was an academic exercise until February 6, 2007. On that day, I landed in India and came face to face with the choice that a father makes, "Do I take my child to a polio clinic for a free corrective surgery or feed my family today?" Because in India, taking his child to the clinic means he can't work, and feeding the family requires the day's wages.

So what is that spark, to which I referred in the first question? Imagine being born in the middle of a garbage dump, in a tent constructed of plastic cobbled together so as to keep out the rain, albeit unsuccessfully. Sleeping in the mud is the only bed you know. At what age do you come to understand that living in garbage and working for \$1/day is all you'll ever know? What does it taste like being so poor that you consider a good meal to be scraps discarded by someone else and recovered before the dogs get to it?

Indians of lower caste face these choices every day. I saw this first hand. I also saw Rotarians who went above and beyond the call of duty in their quest to provide education, job training, clean water, medical care, food and shelter. I received an education that no college could provide. I saw humanity in its greatest need, I saw Rotary in its finest hour. I came away with a greater understanding of the fight against polio. A fight, I might add, that will not end when polio is eradicated.

Indian Rotarians need our help, Indians need our help ... your help. Do not let the ennui of the luxury we enjoy dull your sense of humanity. Do not let your prosperity destroy your generosity. On a personal level, the Rotary Foundation needs your financial assistance. Take it from someone who has seen the results of foundation expenditures, your contribution will not be misspent. On a club level, Rotary Clubs in India are looking for partners, at any price level. One dollar goes a long way in India. \$20 can repair a child's twisted foot to face forward so he can walk. \$100 can provide an education to a child who would otherwise be relegated to lifelong illiteracy. \$800 can provide a child with a home, food seven days a week, clothing, and a world class education.

If you ever have an opportunity to participate in an NID, I recommend it. You'll come away a different person. It's not easy, it's hard work, you'll be exposed to a level of sanitation seen only in your nightmares. But it was, by far, the most rewarding thing I have done as a Rotarian. You'll also come away as a committed Rotarian. You'll be a Rotarian giving with your time, with your talents and with your treasures.

The Rotary Club of Panipat Midtown was chartered in 1988. Today, it has 57 Paul Harris Fellows and four Major Donors, including a Level 3 Major Donor. Their commitment to Rotary is but one example – I saw this level of commitment everywhere I went in India. Their commitment is reflected in their choices. They choose to be Rotarians, active Rotarians. What do the choices you make say about your commitment?

-- William S. Coffman Jr.