

The Story of PolioPlus

In 1979, Rotary International launched a five year polio immunization project in the Philippines through its Health, Hunger, and Humanity (3-H) Program, with the goal of protecting some six million children against the disease. Later, the World Health Organization would report that the number of polio cases in the Philippines dropped nearly 60 percent between 1980 and 1982

But, in the summer of 1980, at Rotary International's 75th Anniversary Convention held in Chicago, Illinois, Rotarians were given an even greater challenge by Dr. Albert Sabin, developer of the oral polio vaccine. As the keynote speaker of the Convention and with the utmost confidence, Dr. Sabin expressed his sincere belief that polio could be conquered worldwide. In his speech, he emphasized that this dreadful disease could be eliminated by an organization such as Rotary, with its representatives available in almost every country, volunteers who would actively participate in their communities across the world.

In the audience that day was George Gardner, president of Trenton Rotary (1980-1981). Impressed and excited by what he had heard, George returned home with an idea for a model project that could be replicated worldwide. His vision, overall, was that a single Rotary Club, groups of Rotary Clubs or Rotary Districts could select a particular country and work to wipe out polio in that country. Specifically, he invited the other four Rotary Clubs from Mercer County in District 7510 - Hamilton Township, Hightstown-South Brunswick, Lawrence Township, and Princeton - to join the Trenton Rotary in helping to make his vision a reality. Meanwhile, George presented the concept to Rotary International. The response was extremely enthusiastic and approval was given for George to initiate a pilot project in Barbados, which would serve as a Rotary International Worldwide Project.

The Barbados project, however, was different from what George had envisioned; a structure for routine mass polio immunization and an organized delivery system had been in place there for several years. Although Barbados had been doing an outstanding job in its national polio immunization campaign, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) felt that due to inflation and other economic problems, Barbados could not continue to maintain its well-documented program without a substantial donation to cover the costs of the current campaign (1980). Both Rotary International and the PAHO felt that, despite the fact, Rotarians involved in the model project would be supporting a country with a polio immunization program already in place, their financial investment would be secure. In addition, one of the most important elements of the project would be the international aspect of having Rotary Clubs in two countries (the United States and Barbados) helping the government of one of the countries. Such a concept of shared Rotary involvement had positive implications for future projects and could be used as a model for other Rotary Clubs!

Regrettably, the Barbados project waned and George heard nothing further on the subject from Rotary International, PAHO, or the Rotary Club in Barbados. Perhaps the relationship with a service organization was not what the government officials of Barbados deemed appropriate at the time. Early on, there was considerable skepticism about the value of a community service organization, such as Rotary, assisting medical professionals in the public health field. But, one thing is almost certain - George Gardner had planted the seed with Rotary International and with the PAHO for polio projects in Latin America. The history of PolioPlus indicates that Rotary started polio immunization efforts in 1981 in Latin America with projects in Haiti and Bolivia followed by polio projects (up to 1985) in Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Panama, and St. Lucia. Then, in 1985, Rotary International announced its global

initiative to wipe out polio. Thus, although George Gardner has never received the credit he deserves for being a visionary, in truth, the dream he shared with Rotary International in 1980 has indeed become a reality.

In 1985, Rotary International created PolioPlus, a program to immunize all the world's children against polio by the year 2005 - Rotary's centennial. Together, in global partnership, Rotary began working with the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and others, to create a polio-free world.

To finance this ambitious undertaking, Rotary International set a goal to raise \$120 million to provide the oral polio vaccine necessary for newborns in the developing world. A letter was sent to the president of every Rotary Club throughout the world, requesting that a specific dollar amount (new money) be raised for the Polio 2005 Plan over a period of three years. Based on its membership, the Trenton Rotary was assessed \$30, 000 and Howard Berger was named Chairman of the PolioPlus campaign.

Under Howard's strong and capable leadership, two fund-raising projects were initiated the same year. Breakfast at Macdonald's, from 7:00-11:00 a.m. one Saturday morning, was the first project. With Rotarians assisting and with the cooperation and financial assistance of Leo Smolar, owner of the MacDonald franchise and a Rotarian, Trenton Rotary was able to realize approximately \$6,000 in net proceeds.

The second project, a gala cocktail party and auction, was held at Bristol-Myers Squibb's corporate center in Princeton, New Jersey. Through Howard's efforts, on behalf of Rotary and PolioPlus, the corporation was persuaded to donate both the food and the use of the facilities for the event. Trips, the use of vacation homes, art objects, and lovely gift items were donated by

members and friends of Trenton Rotary for the auction. The entire event netted well over \$25,000; the combined total for the two projects exceeded \$31,000. In an outstanding demonstration of commitment to a cause and to service, Trenton Rotary met its pledge of \$30,000 to PolioPlus in a single year.

Similarly, when the global campaign ended, July 1987 to June 1988, Rotary International had doubled its goal and, instead of \$120 million, collected more than \$247 million. Since all the monies could not be spent immediately, the major portion was invested. By the year 2005, Rotary's financial commitment to eradicate polio will exceed a half billion dollars.

On September 4, 1994, at the Pan American Health Organization headquarters in Washington D.C., Dr. Frederick C. Robbins, chairman of the International Commission for the Certification of Poliomyelitis Eradication, made a milestone announcement, declaring the Western Hemisphere to be polio-free. At the meeting, Dr. Robbins cited Rotary International "not only for raising money but for its contribution of people and assistance for the program". He went on to say that Rotary "deserved special commendation' for its global efforts.

In 1994, Sandra Lohr accepted the position of PolioPlus Chairperson as a Trenton Rotary committee assignment. By early 1995, with the Trenton Rotary Club leading the way, she began to organize a community coalition which included Mercer County and surrounding area Rotary Clubs, as well as the State Department of Health, the Trenton Loves Children immunization project, area hospitals, the Delaware Valley United Way, area nursing schools, community health officials, the mayor of the City of Trenton, and township mayors, state and congressional leaders, and the media. This effort focused on bringing to the attention of the community a better understanding and awareness of Rotary's PolioPlus Immunization Project. By coordinating with National Child Immunization Week, April 22-30, 1995 emphasis was placed on a dire need in

the greater Trenton community to immunize all children under the age of two.

In researching the subject, Sandy discovered information and statistics from the State Department of Health which revealed that in New Jersey over half of the children under the age of two were not properly immunized, putting them at risk of contracting potentially serious diseases, such as polio, measles, diphtheria, whooping cough, mumps, spinal meningitis, and others. To overcome this serious problem, Sandy's plan centered on organizing and implementing a local Child Immunization weekend by bringing together the several community groups who were working independently and combining their efforts into one major coordinated immunization campaign. Her plan included the following elements:

- The Trenton Loves Children project received a \$25,000 state grant to help with the costs of setting up ten free clinics sites during the weekend of April 29th and 30th, (during National Child Immunization Week) and the Mercer County Health Officer's Association was also willing to establish eight free clinics throughout Mercer County.
- A multi-media campaign launched on April 20, 1995 using a 30-second Public Service Announcement featured Dr. Harris Lillienfield, president of the New Jersey Chapter of the American Pediatrics Association as the spokesperson; both video and audio for television or radio were made available.
- Newspaper articles focused on the need for childhood immunization, with emphasis on the combined Rotary/Trenton Loves Children Immunization Project.
- Ads aimed toward educating parents on the risks of not immunizing their children and details on where to go for the free shots, times the clinic sites were open and a telephone number to call if transportation was needed.
- Bilingual fliers were disseminated community wide.

- Posters were set up at all clinic sites.
- Stickers, coloring books, and other gifts for the children were distributed at the clinic sites.
- Door to door canvassing by nursing school students and volunteers to alert parents to the free clinics were conducted during the entire weekend.
- The Red Cross made free transportation available to any clinic site.

Highlighting the Immunization Project was the Press Kickoff Luncheon, hosted by the Trenton Rotary Club and chaired by Sandy Lohr, on April 20, 1995 at Freddie's Tavern. Attending were representatives of the coalition, many mayors from throughout Mercer County, County Executive, Robert Prunetti and many Rotarians involved with the project from the local, district and state level. Proclamations were received from Senator Bill Bradley, Gov. Christie Whitman and other political leaders acknowledging Rotary's efforts in the community/county - wide coalition and its dedication to eradicating polio worldwide.

In New Jersey in 1994, over half the children under the age of five were not properly immunized. By 1996, the number had improved to 24%, due in large part to immunization campaigns, such as the highly successful one for which Sandy Lohr was responsible.

In 1997, still PolioPlus chairperson, Sandy Lohr planned and executed a second Mercer County immunization coalition initiative during National Child Immunization Week - April 20-27, 1997. Efforts included:

- The City of Trenton through the Trenton Loves Children project hosted clinic sites during National Immunization Week
- The Mercer County Health Officer's Association established various free clinic sites throughout the area.
- Area nursing schools and their affiliated hospitals also had clinic sites in the Mercer area

- The United Way of Greater Mercer County provided phone lines so that people could call for information about clinic sites and, together with the Red Cross, provided transportation to anyone in need.
- Bilingual fliers with immunization information were printed and distributed by Rotary Clubs and through the Mercer County Hispanic Association.
- A multi-media effort to educate parents on the risks of not immunizing their children and details on where they could go for immunization was launched at the Press Luncheon on April 17th; Comcast Cable, WZBN, TKR, NNN, WIMG and WHWH, along with The Times and The Princeton Packet participated.
- Articles were written in The Times on immunization.

Added to this 1997 campaign were the following features;

- Letters were written to all clergy in Mercer County enlisting their help in educating their parishioners on the importance of immunizing all children and in making the parishioners aware of the availability of free shots at various clinic sites.
- The American Red Cross not only provided transportation for those in need, but also secured vitamin supplies to be given to all mothers bringing their children in for immunization.
- The community group - Hope for Children - accepted responsibility for follow-up when appointments for immunization were missed.

On April 17, 1997, a Press Kickoff Luncheon was held at Freddie's Tavern, hosted by Trenton Rotary with Sandy Lohr as spokesperson, and attended by state and local dignitaries, members of the coalition, and Rotarians. Proclamations were received from U.S. Senator Robert Torricelli, Gov. Christie Whitman, the New Jersey State Legislature, and mayors of Townships

in the surrounding area applauding the efforts of the community coalition and of Rotary Clubs, specifically, in spearheading the drive to eradicate polio globally.

The next year, on April 23, 1998 during national Child immunization Week, Sandy Lohr coordinated and presented to the Trenton Rotary Club a program about continuing local efforts on PolioPlus. The agenda included the following speakers and topics:

- Howard Berger: "History of PolioPlus and Trenton Rotary's Involvement"
- Pat Hart, Mercer County Health Officials: " The Challenge Ahead"
- Michele Racqiazysz, R.N., Trenton loves Children: "Maintaining the Success"

Introduced at the meeting were members of the coalition Committee: Diane Gerofsky (Mercer County Surrogate and Trenton Rotary), Pat Hart (Mercer County Health Officials), Trudy Holsbur (The Times), Craig Lafferty (United Way of Greater Mercer County and Trenton Rotary), Bill Miller (William R. Miller, Architect and Trenton Rotary), Sunday parker (Trenton loves children), and Kevin Sullivan (American Red Cross),

In 1999, Barbara Britton, a member of Trenton Rotary, chronicled "The Story of PolioPlus". The graphic material available, combined with the written narrative, provide for the reader a comprehensive overview of the worldwide campaign to eradicate polio led by Rotary International and the international community and, on a local level, point to the successful projects and partnership created and led by The Rotary Club of Trenton under the PolioPlus banner. Both speak to the leadership, commitment, humanity and service to others that define Rotarians throughout the world. Together, they share a common goal - that of building a healthier global community, one that is polio-free!