

Literacy

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Can you imagine what life would be like if you couldn't read or write? What would your lives be like without literacy? How would you even get here without being able to fill in the travel forms, or how could you preorder your district governor's jacket?

Yet there are 800 million people on our planet who simply cannot read or write. Two-thirds of them are women and three-quarters of them live in the developing world. Without the prospect of an education, how can these people ever hope to lift themselves out of poverty?

Past RI President Glen Kinross has said, "Poverty is the root cause of so much disease in the world, poverty is the root cause of so much hunger in the world, poverty is the root cause of so much pollution in the world." Poverty, we know, also breeds crime, creates political unrest, and can even lead to terrorism. So if Rotarians can help the people of the world to read and write, then they will be lifting folk from poverty and working towards world peace.

In Rotary International we have a wonderful asset in our resource groups, and the one for literacy is no exception. As the general coordinator for two years, 2006 to 2008, I was uniquely privileged to see the huge range of literacy projects being undertaken by clubs and districts. These fall broadly into two areas: teaching reading and writing, and encouraging the development of reading skills.

Of the first type of projects, concentrated language encounter, or CLE, which was devised by Rotarians in Australia, has been an outstanding way of teaching reading. Through Rotary Foundation 3-H Grants and Matching Grants, this method has been used widely in Thailand, Bangladesh, Philippines, Nepal, South Africa, Brazil, and many other countries, teaching thousands to read.

Anyone who attended the convention in Salt Lake City cannot fail to remember the young Turkish girl, born without arms and sheltered at home by her parents until the age of 18 because of their concerns for her well-being. This girl, Emine Yüzay, heard from her brothers and sisters about a free CLE course being sponsored by Rotarians. She joined the

course and managed to read, turning the pages with her toes. She became so successful and changed by these new skills that she now teaches Turkish women to read and write using the CLE method. And, thanks to the magic that is Rotary, Emine now has prosthetic arms. Emine Yüzay, a literacy champion indeed.

Rotarians are also helping to teach people to read using a method called CALS, the computer-assisted learning system. This originated in Canada and can be used anywhere in the world where there is a computer with a broadband connection.

Projects that encourage the love of reading involve many clubs working with their local schools by listening to students practicing their reading or by donating books to schools or libraries. Providing dictionaries as gifts to schoolchildren is really popular in the United States and Canada (90,000 were ordered last year in Florida alone), and the idea has now spread to the UK (55,000 last year), Nigeria (22,000 last year), New Zealand, and other parts of the Rotary world. Most dictionaries have a bookplate in the front saying that they are a gift from a Rotary club, and so they become gifts for life and are a lasting memento of a link with Rotary, both for children and parents.

In 2001, Rotarians in Texas started sending containers loaded with books and school supplies to a district in South Africa. And this continues today. The U.S. effort has now spread well beyond 10 International Assembly Speeches 2009 Texas, with 16 states contributing to the project. Shipments have grown from three every year to three every month, and the books are now distributed throughout southern Africa. These Rotarians are truly literacy champions.

Rotarians realize that help with literacy is needed at home as well as abroad, and that a lack of literacy skills can be a problem for adults as well as children. In the United Kingdom, we have five million adults who cannot read or write and can't read safety instructions on machinery or labels on medicine bottles.

Adults with reading needs tend to require specialized help. Even more of a challenge is our prison populations, so many of whom are illiterate. And, of course, illiteracy itself is a form of imprisonment, or even slavery. Indeed, 150 years ago, it was illegal to teach a slave to read.

The reason? Literacy is the first step to freedom!

But there are Rotarians who do help with these challenging literacy projects, especially with young offenders. Once these young people can read and write well enough to fill in the forms to get a job, many don't return to prison again. It is also remarkable to see how rapidly adults learn to read, once they have overcome the barriers that have prevented them

from learning in the past. They learn in just a matter of months rather than years. And, it is often said, if you teach a woman to read, then she will teach her children or grandchildren to read.

So there are many opportunities for Rotarians to get involved with literacy projects. Whether for young or old, at home or abroad, there will be literacy projects for your districts and your clubs.

The RI Literacy Resource Group can help with project ideas and ways to get literacy projects underway.

Just go to the RI Web site and search the keyword “literacy,” and you will find a wealth of brochures, sample projects, fact sheets, and suggested contacts. The resource group encourages the organization of literacy seminars in clubs, districts, and zones and the presentation of awards to literacy champions, who could be Rotarians, teachers, or students. If I leave you with just one thought today, it must be that a literacy project is something that each and every club in Rotary International can undertake.

This then is our opportunity. For those of us who have been lucky enough to learn to read and to write, for those of us who have benefited from an education and have had the opportunity to avoid a life in poverty: We can all be literacy champions. Rotary can be the world’s literacy champion. Let’s do it!