

Morgan Hill Times

mh rotary joins fight against polio

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People over 50 will remember the annual summertime terror of polio, a vicious scourge that sickened, crippled and killed children with appalling randomness. The polio vaccine developed by Dr. Jonas Salk that went online in 1955, followed by the oral vaccine of Dr. Albert Sabin a few years later, lowered the infection rate in developed countries to nearly zero.

Even so, there are still 600,000 polio survivors in the United States and untold millions worldwide.

Now Rotary International plans "Polio Plus", intending to wipe out the disease entirely by the year 2005 - the service group's centennial year - by a fundraising campaign to support the eradication efforts. Donation cans will begin appearing around Morgan Hill next week in grocery stores and other sites.

"The majority of countries are polio free," said Scott Schilling, a local developer and president of the Morgan Hill Rotary. "The reason we are pushing the campaign right now," he said, "is to get the needed funds to those 10 countries."

Rotary, challenged by the World Health Assembly, has been working since 1985 to eradicate this disease from the rest of the world. Since that time the majority of countries have remained 99 percent polio-free. But, in 10 countries, there is still work to be done.

Most of the countries are in Africa, starting with Egypt and continuing south along the Red Sea. Other countries are in west and southwest Africa, and on the Indian subcontinent as well.

Joining Rotarians, who number 1.2 million worldwide and 87 in Morgan Hill, is UNICEF, the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Protection, governments around the world and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

"Most governments have been very cooperative," Schilling said of past polio eradication efforts. "But there has been some resistance from small villages because of misinformation." Rotary is working with local governments to make sure the villagers understand what a polio-free life would mean to their children.

The polio eradication plan has worked so well, Schilling said, because the organization has a good reputation in foreign countries.

"People know Rotarians for their service," he said.

During the first eradication campaign, 1985 to 2001, Rotary and its partners administered almost 2 billion oral polio vaccines to the world's children; in 2001, a record 575 million.

Polio virus primarily strikes children under the age of 5.

The goal is for the 30,000 Rotary clubs worldwide to raise \$80 million.

"We will take anybody's money for this program," Schilling said. "As long as it's legal."

"Every club has set a goal but we expect to get a significant part (of the money) from

members," Schilling said. "Our club's goal is \$15,000 from within the club and an additional \$5,000 from the community."

"I joined Rotary because it gives you a unique opportunity to provide service in a lot of different areas," Schilling said. "It's a group of business people involved in almost every organization in town: with youth, high school scholarships, grants and donations to local charities."

Rotary works with El Toro Youth Center and, with the City of Morgan Hill, built an additional facility at that center, he said. Club members regularly perform major work at Villa Mira Monte, the old Hiram Morgan Hill House. They sponsor an annual dinner for seniors in the spring and donate to "Young At Heart" that takes music to rest homes.

The local club has sponsored a school in Argentina, an orphanage in Bolivia and funds supplies for a medical clinic in India.

"Rotary gives us a great opportunity to give something back to the community and the world," Schilling said. "We can make a difference."

Details about Rotary and Polio Plus are at www.rotary.org and contributions can be made online or sent to The Rotary Foundation, P.O. Box 75133, Chicago, Ill 60675-5133. Or drop a check in a local donation box and help the Morgan Hill Rotary meet its goal.

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