

Why I am a proud member of Rotary



I became a Rotary member in 1996. I came to lunch, I contributed to the Foundation, I worked my tree shifts. All the things a good Elizabethtown Rotarian does.

But in 2008, my life changed forever because of Rotary. Connie Spark had been very persistently encouraging me to join in the Rotary Foundation medical missions she organizes. Adding another optometrist to join Dr. Spotts and Dr. McClenthen would mean more people could be seen and more people helped. I finally gave in and was able to join the mission to the slums of Nairobi, Kenya. At that time, I had only one stamp in my passport (Bermuda).

Off I went to Africa. What an awesome experience it was. I found out there is a world outside the cozy confines of central PA. I also found out that I live an incredibly blessed life in this paradise we call the United States. And...I became fully aware that I take soooo much for granted – clean water, emergency responders, sanitation, and safe shelter to name only a few.

Since that first mission, I have been truly blessed to be able to participate in 6 other medical eye missions including 2 in Harrisburg, Ecuador, Brazil, Thailand, and several weeks ago Jamaica.

Every one of these missions can provide a myriad of wonderful stories and Rotary moments. Providing sunglasses to an 12 year old albino child who lives under the blazing African sun – life changing. Providing a pair of reading glasses to a 68 year old in Ecuador who never before had glasses – life changing.

But let me tell you about Naomi in Jamaica who I saw 3 weeks ago. Naomi is a 33 year old who works as a housekeeper at a local resort in Treasure Beach. She is brought over to my chair and the Rotary volunteer tells me that the auto-refractor didn't work right because it gave a really strange prescription.

I sit down with her and she is holding a small bottle wrapped in a rag and the bottle is filled with a greenish liquid. She tells me that she had had glasses when she was a teenager, but can't afford them now. An eye exam and glasses costs the equivalent of 10 weeks pay in Jamaica. She has headaches all the time and sniffs the greenish liquid in the bottle to lessen the headaches. Apparently she has been doing this for about 10 years.

As I get into the exam, I discover that the bizarre reading from the auto-refractor is actually very good. She has over 12 diopters of far-sightedness (which is like 50 clicks of power in the phoropter). As I have her look through the prescription she breaks into a huge smile and whoops with joy that she can see the eyechart. Once she gets her glasses, she'll be able to retire the greenish liquid, live without headaches and see clearly.

Naomi's life is changed. This is what Rotary does...over and over ... all around the world. Whether its saving a child from polio, providing a village with a clean water source, rebuilding a hurricane ravaged community, or providing Naomi with the gift of sight, Rotary changes lives – all of our lives...those we help and those of us who work as the cogs in the wheel.

Dr. Joseph Rebman – November 2013