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PROMOTING LITERACY INITIATIVES ABROAD THROUGH ROTARY PARTNERSHIPS

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In the Spring of 2005, on a trip to Atlanta, an article in the US Airways Magazine, August 2005, p. 75, caught my attention, "Universal Literacy: And How Room to Read Contributes To That Goal," by Michael Ybarra. Michael described how John Wood in 1998 quit his job as a marketing director at Microsoft to go trekking in Nepal. Invited by a local teacher to visit a classroom of a village school at Bahundanda, Wood described the conditions to be appalling—80 kids in one grade with 20 books described as backpacker castoffs—for example, Danielle Steel and Lonely Planet's guide to Thailand.

According to Michael, Wood sent an email to friends back home and requested book donations be sent to his parents' home in Colorado as he thought he'd return to Asia with the books the next time he visited. Arriving home, he found 3,000 books waiting for him. Later, he returned to Bahundanda with his father and 8 mule-loads of books. This was the beginning of Wood's decision in 2000 to found a non-profit foundation named Room to Read.

Reading this article led me to think that Wood's project to enhance and enliven literacy in Asia might be a goal I could share. My membership in The Rotary Club of Charlotte gave me insights into grants that are available to promote various educational, health and cultural projects in international settings. The Rotary International Matching Grants Program seemed a natural entrée for an application to support a literacy project.

Returning to Charlotte and contacting a colleague at Bank of America, I questioned if her family in Nepal might be interested in assisting me in joining with a Rotary Club there to apply to Rotary International for funds to provide books, furniture, reference materials and

computers to a school they may identify. Immediately, she suggested a club in Kathmandu where her brother is a member and also a school just outside Kathmandu, St. Xavier's School Godavari. Working together, my colleague coordinated with her brother and the Principal at St. Xavier's School Godavari to make an application with the Rotary Club of Charlotte to acquire a matching grant which totaled \$18,055 to purchase books, computers, furniture and reference materials for the children and teachers of St. Xavier's Godavari School.

Matching grants programs require a US Rotary Club to seek funds from its members, from the District Rotary Office and from the Club of the Host Country (Nepal). These funds are then matched by Rotary International to bring a substantial amount of funding to a project. Literacy is a strategic initiative for Rotary International and applications are considered very carefully.

The time and effort involved during the year, especially the long project of a grant application, may seem challenging at times but the end result is overwhelmingly fulfilling. St. Xavier's School Godavari is a primary school for both boys and girls (unique in a region where education is often limited to boys). Founded in 1950-51, 15 kilometers from Kathmandu, St. Xavier's School Godavari admitted its first group of 65 students. The school quickly grew to 250 boarding students. The two founding goals for the school were: 1) its decision to be co-ed, as one-half of the country's population is women and the literacy rate among them is very low, and 2) that the school will cater to the students from the surrounding neighborhood, especially those who are economically poor and socially disadvantaged.

Today, St. Xavier's Godavari School has 875 students, 35 teaching staff and 15 non teaching staff. The students are writing their high school board exams. Prachanda Shrestha, of the Rotary Club of Kasthamandap Kathmandu, recently wrote to the President of Charlotte Rotary, "I take great pleasure in informing you that the Matching Grant of USD 18,056 equivalent to Nepalese rupees 1,171,834 @ 64.9 for St. Xavier's Godavari School Library Project has been received on 13th August 2007.....I specially rejoice that your initiative and your Club's efforts in this project has successfully materialized. I along with Fr. Mathew, the new Principal,.....will ensure that the project is successfully executed at the earliest."

Along with the email to The Rotary Club of Charlotte were pictures of the library at St. Xavier's Godavari School, of the children, teachers and staff. Clearly in front of them were books, furniture, computers and materials funded by the Matching Grant.

John Wood's impact is going forward at a very swift pace in helping with literacy efforts in Asia in his Room to Read Program, <http://www.roomtoread.org/>. Fellow Rotarians across the United States can help John by finding Rotary Clubs in Asia to join their literacy efforts in making applications to The Rotary International Offices for matching grants, <http://www.rotary.org/en/Pages/ridefault.aspx>, just as The Rotary Club of Charlotte found and pursued grant funding.

For more information on St. Xavier's School Godavari, see <http://www.stx.edu.np/>

A library or librarian wishing to coordinate with local Rotary Clubs for help in funding literacy projects is relatively easy. Rotary Clubs have various priorities for awarding gifts—literacy, health and human services, the arts and education. The Rotary Club of Charlotte provides funds to support Classroom Central, a non-profit service for public school teachers, providing free classroom supplies and materials

to aid in instruction and learning. Also a local initiative, Charlotte Reads, receives donations of requested books for elementary schools that serve a significant number of minority children who are economically disadvantaged. Both of these efforts are reviewed yearly to assess need and funds are donated to the local community. New projects are encouraged and Rotary members are free to submit projects that they perceive to be worthy.

A library or librarian wishing to create a partnership with a school, a community or an institution abroad and request Rotary support for the project may find the challenge takes more time and effort but is often successful. The steps in a search for funding an international project are as follows:

- Find a local Rotarian that is willing to listen to a proposal.
- Identify a Rotary Club in the host country (where you want to conduct your project).
- Secure a Rotarian in both clubs to agree to your proposal.
- Secure the approval of the Club in your city or town to enter into the application process for matching funds from both clubs - the Rotary district office and the grants officer of Rotary International.

While this may sound daunting, once you have the local Rotarian to help you, and you identify the international club and a contact there, you are on your way.

The challenge to gaining approval of a matching grant for an international literacy project is the building of a strong relationship with your local Rotary Club and your sponsoring Rotarian. You do not have to be a member of the Club to bring an idea to a Rotarian but you may elect to join a local Rotary Club as you find you can become a spokesperson for literacy initiatives and for projects and activities that you believe are worthwhile for funding.

From my experience with the Nepal project, I encourage you to think big, think wide and think out of the box as I am confident a Rotarian and a Rotary Club will be interested in your strong desire to serve your community and communities around the world.