

UWO alumnus volunteers with Rotary International to combat polio

by **Danielle Beyer - Wednesday, June 06, 2012**

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/19404/uwo-alumnus-volunteers-with-rotary-international-to-combat-polio/>

While the spring semester was just getting underway in February 2012, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh alumnus Tom Guyette '68, was on his way to India to spend two weeks immunizing children against polio and assisting with building a dam.

In 2011, there were four polio-endemic countries—Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Nigeria—left in the world, according to Rotary International's website. As of February 2012, the World Health Organization has declared that India is now polio free, but the children there still need to be immunized because of affected neighboring countries.

Guyette, a member of the UWO Alumni Association Board, has been involved with Rotary International, whose PolioPlus program has been contributing to the global eradication of polio since 1985, for more than 32 years. He spent much of his time involved with the fundraising aspect of the organization.

“In 1985, we had hoped that if we could raise \$120 million, Rotary International could eliminate polio from the face of the Earth,” Guyette said. “In reality, we raised \$220 million and started immunizing children throughout the world. Since that time we have spent more than \$1 billion, and cases are down 99 percent since the time we started.”

As part of the trip sponsored by the organization, Guyette and 50 others from four different countries began their journey in a small village, where they immunized about 1,000 children against polio in one day.

Guyette said that on that same day, Rotary International as a whole provided more than 100 million children with the polio immunization.

Although the parents were a little apprehensive at times, Guyette said the children participating in the immunization day were excited to be there and especially loved to have their pictures taken by the volunteers.

“The response was somewhat skeptical because they were not sure exactly what we were doing,” he said. “But the children were so wonderful and so extremely open and appreciative. The brothers and sisters who brought their siblings to the site where they were immunized were very happy, and we gave them little whistles and visors and they thought that was just wonderful.”

The second stage of Guyette's trip took place in a rural village where the volunteers helped construct a dam entirely by hand.

They worked with a local construction company to fill a large hole with rocks and cement, and they

earned the same amount of money as the local workers—\$3.50 per day.

The money earned by the volunteers was then donated back to the local community to build a water tower. Both projects, Guyette said, will help the farmers in the area considerably.

“The people in this area are dependent upon the monsoon season,” he said. “And where they would only get one crop per year before, after the dam is built they are able to get two crops. So for the people in the agricultural area, that was really a big thing for them.”

While he has no specific plans to return to India at the moment, Guyette said he would without hesitation recommend a trip like this to others, and he would like to be involved with another Rotary International service project in the future.

“It was a great experience from the standpoint of being able to help people,” Guyette said. “It's just a matter of trying to do some good in the world, and it was great for me because after being on the fundraising side for many, many years, I finally got to see where the money that we raise for the Rotary Foundation actually goes to work.”

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