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Guest column

Rotary conquering polio

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By JOE BATORY
Times Guest Columnist

History will record it as one of the most ambitious humanitarian undertakings ever made by a private entity: An intense and relentless effort to eliminate polio worldwide by 1.2 million Rotary members in 32,000 clubs in 200 countries.

Since the launch of Rotary's PolioPlus global initiative in 1988, two billion children have received the oral polio vaccine, and at least 5 million people, mainly in the developing world, have been able to avoid polio paralysis because of these immunizations. More than 500,000 potential cases of polio are now prevented each year.

Rotary's financial contribution is rapidly approaching \$1 billion, but of greater significance is the huge volunteer army of thousands and thousands of Rotary club members who have been involved with on-site polio immunizations and/or eradication efforts.

As a result of the efforts of Rotary and its partners (the World Health Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and many governments), polio cases internationally have now declined by 99 percent. The number of polio endemic countries has been reduced from 125 to only four at present — India, Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Rotary's remarkable PolioPlus effort has drawn some strong support of late. Bill Gates has recently donated \$255 million toward the push to finally rid the world of this infectious disease; Rotary are now in the process of raising \$200 million over the next three years as a requirement of this Gates "Challenge Grant." Additionally, the Gates Foundation had previously given Rotary a \$100 million matching grant toward its polio eradication efforts in November of 2007.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has offered this summary of Rotary's PolioPlus effort: "*Rotary has accomplished so much in the face of extraordinary challenges. It has met*

financial goals, and overcome conflict and lack of security in many countries, and conquered cultural barriers. ... When the final chapter on polio eradication is finally written, it will tell of one of the most spectacular success stories ever in public health and highlight Rotary's remarkable service to humanity."

There are 54 Rotary Clubs in Greater Philadelphia's Rotary District 7450, which includes 14 Rotary clubs in Delaware County. Beyond Rotary's PolioPlus campaign, the annual outreach of these Rotary clubs extends locally and internationally to hundreds of community improvement projects through volunteerism, literacy and health improvement activities, clean water initiatives, the largest independently funded educational scholarship program in the world, and a wide variety of activities to build peace and good will.

Joe Batory is the president-elect of the Rotary Club of Philadelphia and the Public Relations Chairperson for Rotary District 7450.