Local Rotary Clubs Partner to Support Unique Program for Disabled Workers and Recipients

What started as a $1,000 donation turned into a $17,000 project that helps people who are wheelchair-bound remain mobile while learning vocational skills. The Rotary Clubs of Cuernavaca, Mexico and Paoli-Malvern-Berwyn (PMB) partnered to support the Karitas Foundations ALEM (Autonomia, Libertad en Movimiento / Autonomy, Liberation Through Movement) Project. With donations from Media, Bryn Mawr and Greater West Chester Sunrise Rotary Clubs and matching grants from Rotary District 7450 and The Rotary Foundation, the dream of ALEM became a reality.

The Karitas Foundation, based in Berwyn PA., is a non-profit organization whose major focus of work is in Cuernavaca Mexico. The president of the Foundation, Reverend Howard Friend, has roots to the Main Line, having lived and served as pastor of two churches here. Although the Foundation covers a variety of outreach projects, one of its projects is ALEM.

ALEM has a workshop in Cuernavaca Mexico, where a now, highly trained team of people with disabilities, design, fabricate and repair specialty wheelchairs, recumbent tricycles, sports wheelchairs, and custom wheeled devices for children and adults with severe physical challenges. In Cuernavaca, there are a number of organizations that provide free wheelchairs to people with disabilities. But the terrain of the city is rugged and the wheelchairs inevitably break down within two years. People cannot afford to have their wheelchairs repaired. Until ALEM, there were no wheelchair repair services available. The grant subsidizes the repairs, charging clients only for labor, which is a significantly smaller portion of the repair cost. The grant also provides moneys to purchase a full inventory of repair parts, special equipment and a utility trailer which is used to transport equipment and ALEM team members to other cities as part of an outreach program. This project is unique in that the disabled themselves are the workers in the wheelchair shop. ALEM is steadily growing toward sustainability and recently became an official worker/owner cooperative. “We already foresee reaching out to Rotary Clubs across Mexico to coordinate Wheelchair Repair Tours and hopefully train local teams to continue making repairs with our support,” said Erik Friend, the project’s director.

What was not anticipated as part of the project but has become its cornerstone is the awareness in the local community that persons with disabilities are capable of working. In Mexico and in many Third World countries, persons with disabilities are often less valued and rarely find work. ALEM is changing this attitude within the communities it touches. Recently a father came to ALEM to have his disabled son’s wheelchair repaired. When he saw that the people repairing the wheelchair were themselves disabled, he started to weep. He said, “now I know my son has a future.”

Rotary clubs are made up of professional men and women with a desire to make a difference in their community and the world. Rotary is probably best known for its efforts in the eradication of polio. To-date, only 3 countries in the world reported any significant incidence of polio. Rotary has continued to take on some of the world’s toughest challenges with a focus on promoting peace, preventing disease, providing access to clean water and sanitation, enhancing maternal and child health, improving literacy and education and helping communities develop.

If you are interested in learning more about Rotary International or becoming a member of a local club within your area, visit Rotary.org or email the Paoli-Malvern-Berwyn (PMB) Rotary Club website at www.rotary7450.org/pmb/index.