

The Shoebox Project Bill Smale

Several years ago, one of the more active members of our Rotary club in Maricopa, Arizona, near Phoenix joined one of the Tucson, Arizona, clubs' projects into Mexico. It has long been called the "shoebox" project.

The basic objective was to deliver gifts on the Day of the Three Kings after Christmas called "Reyes" (Kings) which is actually the Epiphany or the last day of Christmas. Christmas traditionally has twelve



days. Legend has it that three kings were the bearers of gifts to the baby Jesus. Rotarians' gifts were to go to the poorest children in Nogales, Mexico. So, Rotarians from Tucson joined together with gifts for the boys and girls of different ages, packed in shoe boxes

that were wrapped before the top was put back in the shoebox so Mexican Customs could check the insides of the packages on crossing the border. The boxes were then delivered to the Rotary club in

Nogales. The Nogales, Mexico, Rotarians organized a very nice dinner for the families of the children and then passed out the gifts brought by the Tucson groups.

Karen Casady was our representative on this trip and subsequently became the first female president of the Rotary club in Maricopa in its 50-year history (and subsequently became an assistant District Governor). She became so excited with this project that on returning to the Maricopa club she proposed more people join this effort in the next year.



To make a long story short, after discussing the project and how exciting it was to see these kids open boxes with gifts they could use in school or in everyday life, a number of members of the club decided they wanted to be involved in this project but that Nogales was not the city in Mexico people in Maricopa had closest ties with. Rocky Point (Puerto Peñasco) was the vacation spot of many of the longtime Maricopa residents and a place with which many people in Maricopa identify closely.

We decided to go to Rocky Point for a fun trip and to connect with the Rotary club there to see what the potential was for a project similar to The Shoebox Project. We met up with Rotarians in Rocky Point and they were very interested in helping us with the project. However, over subsequent months of trying to contact them and turn the project into something actionable it seems the club became mostly inactive.



It was just our luck that one of our dedicated members for fifty years, Don Pearce, was one of the founders of the Maricopa volunteer fire department and had some communication in the past with the fire department in Rocky Point. His idea, which we very quickly jumped on,

consisted of contacting the fire department in Rocky Point and determining their interest in joining us to get the project started in Puerto Peñasco.

We lucked out again when the firemen ("bomberos" in Spanish) told us they were very excited about helping us and that they would arrange everything if we would just bring the gifts across the border. So around January 6 of 2006 we crossed the border with, if I remember correctly, three cars filled with gifts in shoe boxes. When we got to the fire department in Rocky Point on Friday to talk about the organization for the next day it seems that the fire department was very well-prepared and decided to hand out tickets to the poorest families in the area so they could come to the fire department the next day on Saturday and redeem the tickets for gifts.

We probably had two hundred kids come that day, redeeming tickets for very simple gifts we bought at Target and some other retailers, some of whom had given us very special deals for quantity purchases to help on this project.



It is important to note there was another side to this project which was also very important, and that was making friends with the firemen and enjoying ourselves in Rocky Point during the three-day venture. So even though I portray this as a very worthy cause for the underprivileged children in Rocky Point, it was also a lot of fun for us and a good chance to enjoy one of the most entertaining activities the Maricopa Rotary Club had ever organized. That first year the local newspaper developed an article with contents from interviews they did with the fire chief and us Rotarians. It turned out this was not only good for the children of Rocky Point, it was also very good public relations for the fire department, and that gave us double bang for the buck.



The second year we did this project we had about 300 kids arrive at the fire station and not only was the local newspaper interested in doing an interview and article but the local television station did an interview as well, which again was a public relations coup

for Rotary in general and for the Rocky Point fire department in particular. And on top of that, the mayor of Rocky Point sent a representative over to greet us and to give any assistance they could provide.

The third year, which was last year, we probably had about 500 kids arrive at the fire station and crowd control was very complicated even though the whole project was successful. So we knew we had to make

some changes so we wouldn't have any violence or unhappy participants. Our plan was to reduce the number of items we passed out so we could simplify the hand out process.

I was not there this last year due to a sudden illness but what I understand from Beth Wexler (our club's attendee) and Karen is the fire department decided to take the Rotary club members on their fire trucks, go out into the neighborhoods and pass out the gifts. That took care of the crowd control problem, and it gave the Rotarians an extremely exciting ride on the fire engines. This excited the children as well since the fire engines were coming to bring gifts to them very much as if the Three Kings themselves were showing up!



So as a Rotarian if you would like to join this kind of effort which not only helps the children in a city outside the United States (as your

international service project) you will find you are benefiting in many different ways. Rocky Point firemen are also benefited through an increased visibility as a strong community service organization. In addition to that, you meet some very nice and committed firemen who really care about their community, you can practice your Spanish, eat some of the best food in Rocky Point with fellow Rotarians, firemen and



local politicians, and also enjoy a very good time before and after that Saturday with Rotarians in a very relaxed tourist destination. How could it get any better?



It took an unbelievable amount of time to package these gifts in shoe boxes so that formality has gone by the wayside and has been greatly simplified since we are no longer concerned about customs going across the border. If they find a large volume of gifts we just negotiate a fair duty rate, if you know what I mean.

On the way back to Arizona from Rocky Point we always stop at the "Esperanza" orphanage just outside Rocky Point and make a contribution

there as well. Three years ago we had Sunny Dunn (Rotary member for over fifty years), his son Will, Will's son Buster and myself. We are all Williams! Well, the head of the orphanage at that time was named Guillermo which is Spanish for William, so the introduction went, "Guillermo, this is Guillermo, Guillermo, this is Guillermo, Guillermo, this is Guillermo, Guillermo, this is Guillermo"

It turns out building goodwill and friendships through Rotary projects is a lot of FUN!

Those interested in learning more about participating in this project are invited to contact Bill Smale at bill@smale.us.