

Local Rotary clubs deliver bikes to Cambodian kids

February 15, 2012 – Kim Good

SOUTH MUSKOKA - Members of the Rotary clubs of Bracebridge and Gravenhurst recently returned from an exhausting but rewarding mission abroad, assembling and distributing 1,097 bicycles to children across rural Cambodia, who were in need of transportation to school.

Rotary Wheels for Learning is the brainchild of Gravenhurst Rotarian Lisa McCoy, who recognized the need after a visit to Cambodia, a country that has become dear to her heart. She has been instrumental in the opening of the Muskoka School there, as well as the distribution of dental supplies and educational materials over the years.

In the rural areas of Cambodia, schools are few and far between. Young children may live anywhere from five to 10 kilometres away from a school, too far to walk.

With teachers' incomes as low as \$100 a month, a bicycle is a luxury few can afford, said Bracebridge Rotary president Linda Brouillette. As a result, many children just don't attend school.

The 19-day working trip to Cambodia, which concluded on Jan. 24, looked to change that, at least for some.

"I had heard Lisa speak a couple of times to Rotary groups," said Brouillette. "I really believe in international service. I'm president of the club right now and one of my personal goals was to lead a hands-on international service project of my fellow friends and Rotarians to do something good in the world."

As team leader, Brouillette gathered 12 other Bracebridge Rotarians and spouses, and five more from Gravenhurst, including Rotary Wheels for Learning founder McCoy. In addition, a former Bracebridge Rotary exchange student from Australia and her cousin also joined the group, bringing the total to 19. The group worked since last March to raise over \$50,000, enough for more than 1,000 bikes. It was the largest bike distribution ever for Wheels for Learning. The next largest distribution had been only 180 bikes, but the local group set a goal of first 600, then 1,000 bikes.

"We thought, oh my gosh, we'll never get there, but we did," said Brouillette.

McCoy went on a speaking tour of surrounding Rotary clubs last winter and spring, convincing 17 clubs, from North Bay to Mississauga, to donate money for various numbers of bikes.

Each complete and delivered bike cost \$50. At the top of donors was Bracebridge Rotary, funding 125 bikes, and Gravenhurst, supplying the funds for 110 bikes.



WORTH THE SMILES. Team leader and Bracebridge Rotary president Linda Brouillette (right) and her husband Dave present bikes to some of the rural children in Cambodia on behalf of Rotary clubs across the province. *Submitted photo*

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"We had lots of clubs in for 10 bicycles and even individuals who were very generous," said Brouillette. Bicycles were sourced from Southeast Asia and arrived at six distribution points in rural Cambodia, essentially already put together. However, before the bikes could be given out, the visiting Rotary team had to install the finishing touches, including pedals, a basket, a light and a bell.

"It was work and it was hot," said Brouillette. "At first we weren't given a lot of direction and it was a little chaotic, but by end of it, we were like an oiled machine ... the assembly just went like clockwork." Contacts in Cambodia made the decisions about which children would receive the bikes, prioritizing the most needy, but for the group, handing out a limited number of bikes was tough.

"The need is endless, it truly is, because, for instance, at one school we went to we were greeted by 400 beautiful young children and we were only giving away 40 bikes," explained Brouillette, who was among several on the team who were reduced to tears that day. "But Lisa's words to the school were 'we'll be back.'"

Although the team felt badly when some were left out, the children themselves took it in stride, happy for their fellow students and their smiling parents.

"That bicycle will be used by the whole family," explained Brouillette. "You see literally three children riding one bike ... so it will get three kids to school ... plus their families will use the bicycles to be able to go to market to bring their rural produce.... It really makes a difference to the whole family."

In addition to the bikes, each team member also took an extra suitcase filled with supplies, such as toothbrushes and toothpaste, 10-kilogram bags of rice, school supplies and clothing, to give out. Though it was not an easy trip, with the work, the heat, humidity and only very basic food and shelter, the group can take great pride in their accomplishments and the difference they made.

"We all have amazing memories of it, good and bad," admitted Brouillette. "Mainly though, the focus for all of us was helping these kids. On the bad days, on the days where you worked and put 300 bicycles together and your hands were covered in grease and you were really hot and sweaty, I think all of us still felt we were doing a good thing and it was worthwhile."

To read the Rotary team's blog recorded during their working trip, visit rwflcambodia2012.blogspot.com. For more information on Rotary Wheels for Learning, visit rotarywheelsforlearning.blogspot.com.