

THE WONDERS THAT FLOW FROM WATER

ROTARIANS
BUILD TOWERS
AND TRUST
IN MYANMAR

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MAW SET, 11, (left) lives with 40 children at the Olive Garden Orphanage in Hmawbi Township, where Rotarians provided a water filtration system (below) in 2008. Each system stores 2,500 gallons of water and costs about US\$8,600. Cyclone Nargis, which killed more than 135,000 people that year, destroyed the bamboo buildings here but not the water tower. A U.S. church helped build a new home for the children in 2011.





In 1962, the new military regime in Myanmar, then known as Burma, began expelling foreign aid workers and restricting the activities of charities. By 1979, the last two Rotary clubs in the Southeast Asian nation had disbanded, after 50 years of service. For decades, Myanmar lingered in crumbling isolation, as many countries imposed economic sanctions and few tourists ventured there. Once ranked among the richest nations on the continent, the “Jewel of Asia” became the poorest.

Rotarians from Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries continued to provide aid, however. They’ve worked quietly behind the borders with Burmese partners, preserving good relations and a window to the outside world. Among them is J.T. Warring, of California, USA. On a side visit from Thailand, where he helped with tsunami relief, he learned that children at orphanages in Myanmar often contract diseases from contaminated water, and that their daily ritual of carrying water from distant sources leaves little time for education.

Warring began an effort in 2005 that has provided 26 orphanages with sustainable water management systems, including the tower at the Aung Zayer Min Monastery (previous pages). The systems, built with funding from The Rotary Foundation, supply clean water for drinking, cooking, washing, and irrigation.

Since Myanmar’s recent introduction of political and economic reforms, the tourists have returned to see Asia as it existed 50 years ago, with picturesque temples and rice paddies – and extreme poverty. International businesses are opening offices, as many nations, including the United States, have restored full diplomatic relations. After visiting the water systems, Kalyan Banerjee, 2011-12 RI president, announced that he would lead the effort to reintroduce Rotary, and its commitment to humanitarian service and peace, in Myanmar.





PAST RI DIRECTOR PAUL NETZEL (top left) and Warring, members of the Rotary Club of Los Angeles, which supports the effort, tour the water tower at New Life Orphanage in East Dagon Township outside Yangon, formerly Rangoon. Netzel (bottom left) visited the orphanage and several others in May, bringing balloons for the children, who had little time for play before Rotarians built the water filtration system. Warring, a Rotary Foundation Major Donor, spends about six months every year volunteering in Myanmar.





PRIVATE ORPHANAGES, including those that received the water systems, provide a critical safety net in Myanmar, which ranks 149th on the United Nations' 2011 Human Development Index, between Angola and Cameroun. Warring commissioned a Burmese civil engineer to design the systems. A pump draws water from an existing tube well into a ground tank, where sediment is removed. The water then travels to a 22-foot-tall tower, where it is stored in two blue tanks, then gravity-fed to taps that supply water on demand.





SEASONS IN MYANMAR are intense, bringing floods in the wet season, drought and temperatures above 100 degrees in the hot season. To escape the May heat, children nap beneath the floorboards of the lunch hall at the Aung Zayer Min Monastery (left). The water systems provide a safeguard for the community during the hot season. They've also helped the orphanages to sustain flocks of chickens and grow surplus crops to sell. In 2010, the project received \$100,000 in Special Initiative Grants from the Foundation under then Trustee Chair Carl-Wilhelm Stenhammar. With the new grant model under the Future Vision Plan, which will launch worldwide 1 July, Rotarians can fund projects in a non-Rotary country, such as Myanmar, with district grants. If Rotary returns to Myanmar, foreign club members could partner with Burmese Rotarians on larger global grant projects.