

FLYING TO FIGHT POLIO

The first time Noel Jackson jumped out of a plane, it had nothing to do with raising money for polio eradication.

The Michigan dentist had received a gift certificate from members of his staff to go skydiving because they knew he was into adventure.

“It is definitely a defining moment,” says Jackson, a member of the Rotary Club of Trenton, Mich., of that first jump at 14,000 feet, done in tandem strapped to a professional skydiver. “The rush of the free fall is beyond anything I have ever experienced before. Just the speed and acceleration is unbelievable. You don’t even have time to figure out if you are enjoying it or not; it’s just a sensation that happens.”

Jackson did enjoy the sensation, so much so that he agreed to do another jump, with Shiva Koushik, a Rotarian friend in nearby Windsor, Ont.

The two men were waiting for this second jump when their wives came up with the idea of enlisting other jumpers and raising pledges for polio eradication.

In August 2014, a jump in the skies of northeastern Michigan raised \$15,000 for Rotary’s polio eradication campaign. Matched 2-to-1 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the effort contributed \$45,000 to the cause.

Since 1985, when Rotary committed to polio eradication, the organization has contributed more than \$1.5 billion and countless volunteer hours to immunize children against the disease. In that time, the number of polio cases has dropped 99.9 percent, and only three countries remain where the virus has never been stopped: Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan. While World Polio Day, 24 October, serves as an important opportunity to remind the world of the need to finish the job, raising money and awareness is a year-round effort for many.

Late-night recruiting

Julie Caron, a member of the Rotary Club of Toronto Skyline, heard about plans for the Michigan fundraising skydive after being invited to speak at a leadership training event in Koushik’s district.

“We were in one of those friendship rooms after the conference ... when Koushik began talking about the skydive,” Caron says. “We all got really excited and signed up.”

“I don’t like to back out on things I say I’m going to do, even if it’s the middle of the night,” Caron says. So she began raising money and drove down to Michigan to do the jump.

She also took the idea back to her own club, whose members are mostly young professionals looking for fun things to do. This past July, 10 members from Toronto Skyline and surrounding Rotary clubs plunged earthward in their own tandem skydive, raising several thousand dollars for polio eradication.

Caron hopes to make it a yearly event.

“Polio eradication is definitely something I am passionate about,” she says. “It’s not a hard fundraiser to put together at all. You just call around and pick a place, and then you begin asking people if they would rather jump or pay up in pledges.”

Jackson, who’d jumped out of the plane in his “Captain Rotary” outfit, says he personally raised \$4,700 for the Michigan skydive using Caron’s approach.

I would go up to people and tell them we were skydiving for polio and give them two options,” says Jackson. “I would tell them I was paying \$180 out of my own pocket to jump, so if you are not going to jump, you have to pay \$180. Most people would say, ‘OK, you got it.’ ”

Floating like a bird

Koushik and his wife are active in other ways to rid the world of polio. They have been on several trips with their Rotary district to immunize children in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, and particularly enjoy showing off their native country, India, from which they emigrated to Canada about 30 years ago. They are planning to take part in another National Immunization Day in Pakistan next year.

Still, the skydive will hold a special place in Koushik’s heart.

“This is one of the highlights of my polio eradication efforts,” he says. “It’s such a feeling of freedom. The first time out of the plane, you have very little idea what is happening; you are free-falling so fast. But once that parachute opens, you look around and say, ‘Wow!’ It’s such a great feeling to be able to float like a bird.”

[View video.](#)