



Longwood Rotary at their Warm Soles service event.

Local Heroes: Chester County Rotary Clubs

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**WITH A LONG HISTORY OF SERVICE, ROTARY CLUBS
CONTINUE TO BE A BRIGHT LIGHT IN UNCERTAIN TIMES.**

EVEN IN THESE POLARIZED TIMES, WE CAN AGREE that it's more important than ever to give back to those in our communities who are struggling. Fortunately our area has a rich tradition of service organizations that help in a broad range of ways—from medical, to food, to education and many other social services.

For our November Local Hero, we chose to highlight the work of a collection of organizations—the Chester County Rotary Clubs and their mission to provide aid to those in need.

WHAT IS ROTARY?

Founded in 1905, Rotary Club has expanded across the world as a global network of 1.2 million members working in over 35,000 individual clubs to create lasting change not only in their own communities but worldwide.

Members share the responsibility of tackling some of the world's most pressing issues, including promoting peace, providing clean water, supporting education, growing local economies, and the very timely issue of fighting disease. These causes hit close to home with our local Rotary Clubs, especially helping our community through the difficult times caused by the pandemic.

According to the Rotary International website, members are already supporting efforts to “promote proper handwashing, teach people ways to stay healthy and supply vital medical equipment to healthcare providers” on the front lines. These efforts have become even more critical as life in the pandemic continues.

We checked in with several local Rotary Clubs to find out more about the service projects they've been involved with in Chester County and beyond.

HELPING THE COMMUNITY

Things look a lot different for all of us, and local Rotary Clubs are no exception. Many club traditions have now been adapted to fit pandemic living, including regular club meetings now on Zoom (with recorded streams for members with schedule conflicts) along with BYOB Zoom Happy Hours in place of in-person social events and get-togethers. Fundraisers, a key activity, are also changed.

Yet, one thing has remained consistent, and that's the Rotary's service to the community.

Our local Rotary Clubs have had to get creative with the many ways they provide service so members can give back but still stay safe. Connor Smith, President of the Thorndale/Downingtown Rotary said their club decided to hold a Virtual Bingo fundraiser, after their big Mac & Cheese Cookoff was cancelled. This annual fundraiser is designed to help support several groups, like the Brandywine YMCA, so a new format was key.

The Longwood Club decided to use their Rotary Foundation funds to focus on COVID-19-related needs in the community. “It's really important to have a focus,” says President Vicki Gehrt. This sparked the idea of initiating a community assessment to hear directly from people in the area to better determine specific needs and



West Chester Rotary International Project: Providing Clean Water (Pre-COVID)

how best to help. Rotary Foundation funds have also helped organizations like The Maternal and Child Health Consortium with parent training programs along with Good Neighbor and Habitat for Humanity with housing needs in the community.

Luckily some projects were able to continue with slight modifications like wearing masks, social distancing and sanitizing. The Longwood Rotary was able to hold their annual book bag with supplies drive making sure kids have the supplies they need to succeed even though most learning is still virtual.

Other Rotary Clubs have developed pandemic-era projects to address food security. The Wayne Rotary is working with the Wayne Food Pantry, Wayne Senior Center and Mercy Hospice to help feed the hungry. Club President, John Douglas, points out that these groups will continue to need support even after the pandemic subsides.

The Thorndale/Downingtown Rotary has also focused on helping with food insecurity by working with the Honeybrook Food Bank on programs helping mothers and infants and supplying low-income families with lunches for their children during virtual learning.

In addition to helping locally, The West Chester Rotary (marking their 100th anniversary of service in May 2021) has used this time to give back internationally. Club President, Michelle Venema, shared details of their international projects like bringing easy-to-use water pumps to the people of Senegal, sponsoring a college student in Belize, and sending books to children in St. Lucia. These projects are a joint effort with many local Rotary Clubs working together to make a difference in the lives of people around the world. Venema says, “Service will always be needed, and Rotarians live to serve, not only our community but the world every day.”

We at *County Lines* learned about Rotary’s international projects through our writer Carol Metzker. A recipient of Rotary International’s Service Above Self Award (and our 2016 Local Hero), Carol’s life was changed on a 2004 Rotary trip to India to immunize kids against polio, when she met an 11-year-old girl rescued from slavery. That encounter set her on a path to learn about and fight against human trafficking, around the world and in our own backyard in Chester County. She’s spoken before groups worldwide about this issue



Safety precautions at the Longwood Rotary Book Bag Supplies Drive



Carol Metzker speaking at Toronto Rotary on Sex Trafficking Must Stop

as well as debt bondage slavery, and written two powerful books, *Facing the Dragon* and *A Shield Against the Monster*.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Plans for future events—service projects as well as fundraisers—are still evolving. But like the rest of us, Rotary Clubs are getting used to adapting to the current normal.

The Wayne Rotary currently has plans to collect holiday gifts for CASA Youth Advocates, a child welfare organization serving at-risk youth, Downingtown and Thorndale Rotary hopes to hold another virtual bingo fundraiser, and the Longwood Rotary has a secret project in the works—so stay tuned!

“One thing we do after every meeting is remind ourselves that we are a service organization; we have a purpose,” says Gehrt. And that purpose will always be needed in the community.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

If you’re interested in joining a Rotary Club, members suggest sitting in on a meeting as a guest to experience what Rotary is all about. Contact your local Rotary Club by visiting their website or Facebook page for more information on membership and meeting schedules. New members are welcome!

Our community will always have the helping hand of our local Rotary Clubs, even during these uncertain times, and that is why we honor them as this year’s Local Heroes. ♦



T/D Rotary making a donation to the YMCA Food Donation Efforts