

Rotary District 7780 October 20, 2013

Rotarians Are Called to Action

On July 6th, at 1:30 a.m., an unattended train carrying seventy-two tank cars careened out of control and into the center of town of Lac Megantic, Quebec. Sixty-three tank cars derailed, spilling more than 1.5 million gallons of heavy crude oil. The oil flowed through storm drains and sewers, filled basements of homes and businesses, eventually seeping into the lake itself. The explosion and fireball that followed was seen and heard more than twenty miles away. Heat from the fire damaged buildings in a 3000 foot radius.

In the end, forty-seven lives were lost. Hundreds of families fled their homes that night with just the clothes on their backs, not knowing what happened. Homes were destroyed and others heavily damaged. Businesses were destroyed, inventory and records lost. A hospital was damaged beyond repair.

This train disaster in Lac Megantic has brought incredible hardship to the people in the town and surrounding area. Local food pantry supplies are exhausted. Hundreds of people have lost their jobs due to the loss of businesses and disruption of rail traffic. The contamination of soil and water is massive. Though emergency aid was provided immediately after the disaster, long term restitution is not yet available. The small town of 5900 people has expended its available funds. As would be the case if this had happened in New England, local government and agencies aren't prepared to deal with a disaster of this magnitude. The number of homeless, jobless, lives lost, and impact on families and caregivers is overwhelming.

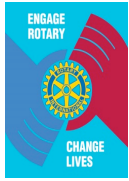
Last weekend, a delegation of Rotarians from District 7780 visited Lac Megantic on a fact finding mission. Peter and I traveled with Roland and Paula Gagne and Paul and Carole Deschambault of Biddeford Saco Rotary to learn, first hand, about the situation in Lac Megantic, the needs, and how Rotarians might help. We toured the area and spoke with residents about the tragedy. This close-knit community is mourning the loss of lives and trying to cope with the loss of jobs, homes, and businesses. Their downtown is a blackened, burned out hole, physically dividing the town in two. Though there is great activity to clear the debris and remove the contaminated soils, it is clearly a race against time to minimize the effect of rain and snow driving the heavy oil deeper into the ground, the water table, and the lake.



This disaster happened just a few hours drive from our homes. Most communities in our area have trains pass through or nearby. This disaster could have occurred in any one of our home towns. When we visited last weekend, it was hard to ignore the smell of oil that still lingers, impossible to turn away from the notes to victims that cover the walls in the church and the barriers around the disaster site. So many homes, though still standing, overlook the burned out town. I can't imagine must it must be like to wake up each morning to see this scene and relive what happened that night.

Clearly there is a need to fill the gap between immediate disaster relief and long term reparations and rebuilding. Clearly there is a need for personal connections - to reach out to remind the good people of Lac Megantic that we remember what happened and care about them. We can't find jobs or replace parents, but we can make sure that children have a slightly happier holiday and know that they have not been forgotten or their suffering ignored. The most important thing we can bring to Lac Megantic is our caring and our love. We are committed to do just that!





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What can Rotarians do?

We are proposing a three pronged project to help support the people in Lac Megantic.

1. **Donate \$50 to help the local food pantry.** Each donated dollar can purchase \$12-\$13 of food from the Provincial Food Bank. If each club donates \$50, more than \$24,000 of food can be provided.
2. **“Adopt” two or more children for Christmas.** Commit to a \$100 budget per person to buy basic clothing and toys. A wish list along size, gender, and likes will be provided.
3. **Donate to a fund to purchase a teddy bear** for every child in the Lac Megantic elementary school. There are 600 children (grades K-6). Bears are available (in bulk) for about \$4 each (*This is a perfect project to invite your Interact/EarlyAct clubs to support*)

I would like to ask *every* Rotarian, *every* club in our district to get involved in this project. Unfortunately, there is no longer a Rotary Club in Lac Megantic. We are their neighbors and clearly they need our support and comfort. Involvement can be by clubs and individual Rotarians. Individuals or families can work together to “adopt” a child. Each of us might reach out to friends, colleagues, or neighbors, share this story and invite them to get involved.

Our challenge is that to make this happen, the turn-around time is very quick.

- commitments to purchase gifts are needed by Friday, November 1
- wish lists will be returned to donors by November 11
- gifts must be received at the staging area in Saco by November 25 - shipping arrangements are in process to avoid possible problems going through customs.

A good will “road trip” to Lac Megantic is planned for December 13-15. Interested Rotarians are invited to join the caravan in the spirit of good will and caring (Lac Megantic is a 4 hour drive from the Portland area). We will present the donations to the local food pantry and distribute the teddy bears in the elementary schools. Area hotels and inns are available for overnight stays.

This project is an exceptional opportunity to reach out to neighbors who need our support and caring. I can’t think of another project that would be as meaningful or more needed than this one. The cost per club or individual is manageable yet the impact will be significant. *Engaged Rotarians - Changed Lives* Yes, we can make a difference! Will your club get involved? Will you help?

Carolyn

Carolyn Johnson, Governor
District 7780

Additional information, pledge forms, and project schedule were sent to each club president and are available on the district website www.rotary7780.org

Questions? Paul Deschambault, Lac Megantic District Service Project Coordinator, PHD@maine.rr.com