

Skaneateles Rotarian earns lifetime achievement award for CNY Books for the World.

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SKANEATELES — Despite founding Central New York Books for the World, Skaneateles Rotarian Ward Vuillemot won't take credit for starting the initiative that sends children's books and textbooks to South Africa and 25 countries around the world.

Instead, he defers the accolades to Charlie Clemmons, from a Rotary Club in Texas, who began the effort in 2000 by sending used books to a Rotary Club member in Johannesburg, South Africa, before Vuillemot added the central New York branch of the Books for the World network in 2008.

"People say, 'Ward started this,'" Vuillemot said. "Ward didn't start this. Ward was just riding Charlie's shirttail."

He was recently honored with a Rotary Lifetime Achievement Award during the district conference in Saratoga Springs for his three decades of involvement with the Skaneateles Rotary Club, including CNY Books for the World.

Bill Conole, a past president of the Skaneateles Rotary Club, presented the award to Vuillemot — who said he knew he was getting some recognition but had no idea it was for lifetime achievement — during the conference.

"The success of CNY Books for the World rests firmly on the shoulders of Ward Vuillemot, who through common sense, practical expertise and devotion to a cause has inspired all of us by faithfully living out our Rotary motto, 'Service above self,'" Conole said.

From his home in the village of Skaneateles, Vuillemot noted that Books for the World promotes literacy, particularly for girls and women, who are not typically given the same educational opportunities as boys and men are given, and help people around the world learn English.

He also said he was present at the moment when Books for the World was born, during a gathering of Rotary district governors — of which Vuillemot was one from 2000 to 2001 — in Anaheim, California.

Ted Pope, the governor representing South Africa, told the group that he was trying to get a grant to put together a program to obtain textbooks for people in his country.

"Charlie says, 'How many do you want?' And Ted says, 'Bury me,'" Vuillemot said. "So, Charlie proceeded to bury him (with books)."

At the time, Vuillemot said, textbooks were standard across Texas, so when one kind of book changed, thousands of copies from classrooms statewide were discarded. Instead, Clemmons stepped in and started delivering those textbooks to South Africa.

Then, in 2008, Vuillemot — through his duties on his district's Literacy Committee — visited Pope in South Africa to follow up on the project and see what additional funding was needed to keep it going. Though he wanted to see Johannesburg, Pope instead showed him the book distribution process.

"There were eight clubs working together there distributing books. It actually knocked my socks off. It was just amazing what I saw," Vuillemot said. "There was a school there loading up a full container — a 40-foot container — of books that had been donated to them. There must've been 6 or 7 containers of books in there in warehouses. ... And teachers coming from all over like kids in a candy store. 'Can I have these? How many can I have?'"

Talking to a young man who he came across there, Vuillemot learned that the greatest need was for children's books because even adults use those to learn how to read. When he returned to Skaneateles, he tasked the high school Interact Club with collecting boxes of children's books.

After getting five or six cartons of books from the high schoolers, Vuillemot said it struck him that he could tie into Clemmons' effort by gathering books and shipping them to Texas, where Clemmons would in turn ship them by the container overseas.

Given 10 minutes at the district conference that fall, Vuillemot presented his idea to fellow Rotarians with photos of his experience in South Africa.

"I wanted a project that Rotarians would work with their community, have to work with their community. There was none of this doing it on its own," he said. "They had to fund it. They had to put sweat equity into it. It was international, and it would be focused on literacy. Those were my criteria."

The project would be built around books, Vuillemot told the conference, but he didn't want just one book. He wanted a pallet of books, which he said would hold 24 cartons and weight about a ton.

"You had to fill the whole pallet," he said. "You had to find the books, sort the books, pack the books. You've got to fund the shipping, the materials and the shipping to Texas. From there on, we'll use grants."

Thus, CNY Books for the World started with one district of about 40 clubs and soon expanded, with a committee heading it, to four other districts around New York and into Canada. Vuillemot found truckers to haul the books and warehouses to store them, and later on, Rochester-based Western New York Books for the World branched off as the effort grew.

To date, he said CNY Books for the World has shipped 27 53-foot tractor trailers of books to Texas.

"We're still doing it," Vuillemot said, noting it has remained an exclusively Rotary project backed by corporations, donations and other support.

Though the overall effort has expanded into other types of books, he said in Skaneateles he still focuses on children's books because "they're still golden," with drop-off points around the community.

He also collects all of the children's books at the end of the Skaneateles Library's book sale and gets books from the Skaneateles school libraries as well.

"This has been a team effort working close with our community," Vuillemot said.

And this effort has resulted in donations of books that he calls "thrice-loved books" — "Those are books that your children loved, your grandchildren loved and, guess what, you're not going to throw them out. They're hidden under the stairs or the closets," he said. "I want them because I've got a third person to love them."

What started just in South Africa with Clemmons and Pope has since spread, in Vuillemot's time, throughout the southern regions of Africa, parts of Central and South America, and countries that include Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and the Philippines.

Eve with that growth, Vuillemot said his only contribution is forming CNY Books for the World as a feeder network into Clemmons' and Pope's project. He called them "really the originators" of Books for the World.

Before CNY Books for the World came along, books came out of Texas, Oregon, Washington state and a few others. Some Rotarians would get together for a single shipment but then shut down their operation.

"My idea was to stay with it as long as it's there — and I think it's going to last for a good bit of years — and make it sustainable," Vuillemot said. "It's international. It's literacy. ... And it's Rotarians being involved with their community, not just keeping what they do — their good works — under a basket."