

ROTARY DISTRICT INTERNATIONAL SERVICE COMMITTEE:

DR. ILA SHAH, GLOBAL GRANT SUPERSTAR!

By DISC Co-Chairs Sharon Taylor, Annapolis Rotary Club and May O'Brien, Washington, DC Rotary Club.

Dr. Ila Shah is proof that small clubs can take on big projects. What you need is passion! Dr. Shah is also proof that one person can make a difference!

After her children had grown up and she had time to spare, Ila joined the Charlotte Hall Rotary Club in southern Maryland when she was 50, to “fulfill her dream of helping out others.” She was impressed with Rotary’s motto of “Service Above Self” and its humanitarian service mission. She wanted to help.

Charlotte Hall is a small club with 14 members that spent most of its efforts on community service. Dr. Shah changed that. International service was her mission. While The Rotary Foundation has supported her work on 30 global grants, like most Rotarians, she started with one.

How did she start? Polio. “What really inspired me was Rotary’s goal of making the world polio-free. Being a pediatrician, I always felt there should not be any child suffering from an illness or disability that I can prevent simply by immunization.”

Ila decided to tackle polio in India. Her first grant was to bring her medical skills to the table.

She found a boarding school in a small village 3.5 hours from Mumbai, where all of the 150 students had polio. The children were housed there because the parents could not handle them. Most of the kids in Alaphata village could get around only by crawling on the floor or scooting around on their bottoms. Each child was called on by



[Above] Dr. Shah with bilateral cornea transplant patient.

an assigned number.

Dr. Ila Shah saw her first project – polio reconstructive surgeries for 100 students. She organized a team of doctors from Mumbai and brought them to the school. The doctors agreed it was too far to take all students back to Mumbai, and so set up an Operating Room in classrooms and a Recovery Area on the playground. The doctors spent four days there, all day morning to evening.

When the doctors called each patient by their real names, their eyes lit up. A little sister of a patient asked Dr. Shah if her brother would be able to walk upright after the surgery, and walked around with Dr. Shah all day, holding on to her hand. The little girl would not let go of her hand and would not say good-bye, and finally said, “Can you give me something that I can remember you the rest of my life?” Dr. Shah gave the girl her Rotary cap, and only then did the child let go of her hand. After 25 years, Dr. Shah still remembers her name, Tejaswini.

Dr. Shah noted that her most satisfying experience is when she sees a disabled child walk upright

How did Ila raise funds? Each reconstructive surgery for the disabled polio students would cost \$29 per surgery. She asked every person she

met to give \$29 to this project, only \$29 and no more. Her ultimate goal was to make 1,000 patients walk upright. She visited seven Rotary Clubs in southern Maryland and asked them to join her, she worked in a hospital and asked employees for donations, she asked friends and family. In the end, she helped fund reconstructive surgery in five more villages or a total of 2,100 surgeries for children with polio.

What about the disabled after Polio? Next, she worked with the National Association of Equal Opportunity for the Handicapped to provide vocational training and jobs for polio victims. One patient created a small bus selling tea. She worked on another grant to provide 1600 artificial limbs. A patient asked, “let me give you a ride on my scooter,” and zipped her husband around. After the ride, he lifted his trouser bottoms, to show that both legs were artificial. Over the years, 2,000 people have been rehabilitated. “Each time, [each project] really motivated me to do more and more.”

How to start? Go to the Rotary International Convention!

In order to find projects or get inspired, Dr. Shah recommends going to the RI Convention, where you will see all the booths showcasing Rotary service projects in the House of Friendship exhibit hall. This is a perfect place to make new friends around the world and network and share ideas and get guidance from Rotary Action Groups, Fellowships, and International Service partners and meet other Rotarians with the same interests in health and medicine!

(continued on page 5)