

Gastonia native devotes life to helping children with medical care in Honduras

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Before founding a nonprofit organization helping impoverished children in Honduras in 1997, Gastonia native Rodger Harrison was a successful commercial real estate executive, pilot, musician and paramedic.

All those experiences helped prepare him for the task when he became passionate about finding ways to help the Mayan Chorti Indian children in a place with little or no medical care, education programs or disaster relief systems.

Harrison spoke to the Belmont Rotary Club recently about Paramedics for Children International of which he is the founder and president. Accompanying

him to the Rotary meeting was Roz Morton, of Rock Hill, South Carolina, who helped start the organization 26 years ago and still serves as its secretary and treasurer.

Rotarian Dr. Gary McCord of South Point Family Dentistry, a long-time friend of Harrison and a board member

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Harrison. PROVIDED BY BELMONT ROTARY CLUB

Children

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of the group, arranged the Rotary Club presentation.

After more than 25 years of work, Paramedics for Children now has a clinic called Clinica la Esperanza (Clinic of Hope) providing quality medical care to some of the poorest communities in Central America. And it recently opened Hacienda la Esperanza (Hacienda of Hope). This bed-and-breakfast provides lodging for individuals, families and groups of up to 26 people. It often serves as a base of operations for mission groups coming to the area for service projects. All of the proceeds go to supporting the clinic.

After retiring from real estate at age 40, Harrison worked several years as a paramedic with Gaston County Emergency Medical Services. He was sidelined with a shoulder injury in 1997 when he traveled to Central America and discovered the cobblestone streets and adobe buildings in the village of Copan Ruinas, near famous Mayan ruins in Honduras.

"I jumped ship and stayed there and studied Spanish," he told the writer of an article in the Journal of Emergency Medical Services.

He quickly discovered how poorly supplied were the schools in the rugged mountainous region and began a series of return trips bringing supplies, which were delivered on horseback, and using his paramedic training to provide some basic medical care.

Then disastrous Hurricane Mitch struck the region in 1998 bringing 12 inches of rain per day for several days and 120-mph wind. More than 1.5 million were left homeless and 10,000 were killed in Honduras.

Working from North Carolina, Harrison and Morton organized a collection of disaster supplies and equipment, donation of a truck to take the cargo to Florida and a plane to fly it to Honduras. Many more such trips followed before in 2001 Harrison moved to Honduras full time to continue the work, while Morton stayed in the Carolinas to manage fundraising.

An early Paramedics for Children focus became training rescue personnel to use the new equipment that was arriving and also providing ambulances in a



Paramedics For Children International founder Rodger Harrison (left) and Paramedics for Children Secretary and Treasurer Roz Morton told Belmont Rotarians about their work over more than 25 years on behalf of some of the world's poorest children in the mountains of Honduras. Harrison's long-time friend and Rotarian Dr. Gary McCord of South Point Family Dentistry, who is a PFCI Board member, arranged the program. On the right is Dr. Chris Maino, also of South Point Family Dentistry. PHOTO PROVIDED BY BELMONT ROTARY CLUB

region where none existed. Harrison used his EMS connections to solicit donations of used ambulances when communities acquired new. By 2004, Paramedics for Children had developed the first volunteer ambulance service in Central America, with 50 ambulances and 340 volunteer EMTs.

Harrison told Rotarians that reaching new generations of donors, both individuals and corporate, is one of the most important objectives of Paramedics for Children today.

"We also must bring more missions and missionaries to Honduras," he said. "We now have a place where churches can bring mission groups, providing a full-time staff, lodging, travel and support for any type of

project." Some examples of projects, he said, include medical outreach, delivering school supplies, planting fruit trees, revivals and retreats.

For more information, visit PFCI.org. For general information, donations and business, call Roz Morton at 704-763-2251, or email her at Roz.Morton@ParamedicsForChildren.org.

For Honduran operations and volunteering information, email Rodger Harrison at Rodger.Harrison@ParamedicsForChildren.org, or call him in Honduras at +504.2651.4676.

Rotary is an international service organization with 1.4 million members in more than 200 countries. "Service Above

Self" is the Rotary motto. Rotarians work together to promote peace, fight disease, support education, grow local economies and protect the environment.

Belmont Rotary Club, which will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2025, meets for lunch and a program on local topics each Wednesday, 12:30 - 1:30 p.m., at the Home2 Suites by Hilton in Belmont. Guests interested in learning more about local businesses and issues and how Rotary serves the community are welcome. For more information, visit www.belmontrotaryclub.com.

Ted Hall is a member of Belmont Rotary.