

November 2020 Newsletter

Our mission is the same -just our name and logo changed!

Welcome to BELRAG:

Basic Education & Literacy Rotary Action Group

The Board of Directors is pleased to announce the new, more descriptive name for our Rotary Action Group. **BELRAG** better reflects the scope of our work and mirrors the title of Rotary's Area of Focus. **BELRAG** continues to focus on literacy, to be sure, but by including *basic education* in our name, we reinforce Rotary's commitment to improve basic education opportunities for all children and quality literacy programs for children and adults. Rotary's goal is to ensure that all people - children and adults - have sustainable access to basic education by our support for programs that strengthen a community's ability to provide basic education and literacy for all. There are multiple facets within BEL for Rotary involvement: early childhood literacy, adult literacy, education for the girl child (reducing gender disparity in education), education programs for children with disabilities, technology to enhance education opportunities, access to libraries, mentoring out of school or underperforming youth. How we work and what we do all depends on the identified needs in a community and matching that need to the intervention Rotarians can best implement.

It will take time to update resources such as our website to our new name. You can still access the website through www.LITRAG.org Information will be shared as the new domain name is in place.

LITERACY MONTH PROJECT AWARDS

What a tremendous response by clubs to our annual Literacy Month Project Award! More than thirty excellent projects were submitted by Rotary and Rotaract Clubs. Projects were submitted from around the world, illustrating Rotarian involvement in cities and rural areas, ongoing projects and new, innovative ideas. The projects were evaluated based on identified need for education/literacy intervention, impact (number of beneficiaries and/or long term impact), public awareness, Rotarian involvement, and overall effectiveness of the project.

We are pleased to announce the following clubs that will receive the award and recognition for Literacy Month, 2020:

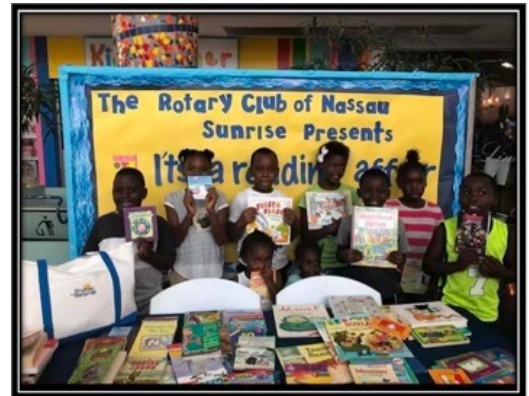
Books Plus, Palo Alto University Rotary (USA) Rotarians worked with partner organizations Bring Me a Book, which offers parents a non-credit course to help them use technology to help their children, and Bookelicious, an online resource that helps children find books that are of interest to them. The project address the concern that 80% of 4th graders living in poverty read below proficient level. Rotary clubs purchased 5 books for each of 100 children, who selected their own book titles Parents were trained in how to offer reading assistance at home to their children. The ability to have tangible books at home through a pandemic lockdown was significant and kept children reading!



Free Reading Program, Scarborough Rotary (Canada) is an online reading program for students from K to grade 6. The program was provided as an after school support for disadvantaged children struggling with academics. It is supported by a charitable arm so that access to the site can be offered to families to supplement children's learning. Access to individualized tracking of progress can be offered to teachers or schools at a reasonable cost. This program is being used by over 304,000 learners in over 185 countries. Scarborough Rotary provides this resource as part of an after-school program to support struggling students.



Super Readers Book Club, Nassau Sunrise Rotary, (Bahamas) focused on ways for children, who were displaced as a result of a devastating hurricane, to express their thoughts and feelings through a variety of literacy initiatives. Support programs included literacy skill building, improving comprehension skills, enhancing speaking skills, developing friendships, and showcasing talent through poetry competitions. Rotary members and guests became mentors to the young readers and writers.



Butterfly Storybook, Rotary E-Club of the Caribbean,



is an annual story-writing contest open to all children age 7-11 living in the Caribbean. The project promotes literacy development (writing skills), shares the culture of the Caribbean, and provides literacy resources to schools in need. Each year, the selected stories are published in a book (versions in English, French, Creole, and Spanish) that is provided to local schools and libraries. A key goal of this project, which involves students and Rotarians in 10 countries of the Northern Caribbean, is promoting international and cultural understanding

Many thanks to the review team who read each project submission, evaluated it on the established criteria, and came to consensus determine which projects would be receive this year's award. Thank you to Rotarians Joan Littleford (Canada), Courtney Doldron (Canada), Sophie Bamwoyeraki (Uganda), Frank Romano (USA), and Todd Cimino-Johnson (USA). Theirs was a difficult decision, given the high quality of the projects submitted. Specific information about each of the selected projects posted on the LTIRAG website. Information about several of the other high quality projects will be shared through the newsletter in the coming months. Congratulations to all participants for their commitment to supporting and improving literacy in their community



Together We Read, a partnership between BELRAG and Save the Children offered a four-part series of webinars focusing on how Rotarians can get involved and support early childhood literacy. The final webinar featured **Dr Kathy Hirsh-Pasek**, professor at Temple University. Dr Hirsh-Pasek discussed the importance of early language development and its impact on learning. The session concluded with a panel discussion on how Rotary can become an advocate for early education. Our panel included **Deborah DePaoli**,

Save the Children Action Network (SCAN), South Carolina State Manager; **Dr. Crystal Campbell**, Executive Director, Dorchester County First Steps, & SCAN Volunteer Advocate; **Mary Jo Jean-Francois**, Rotary, Area Focus Manager, Basic Education & Literacy, Programs & Grants; and **Carolyn Johnson**, BELRAG Chair. A recording of this excellent program is available [Be an Advocate for Early Childhood Education Webinar](#). We appreciate the involvement and support of **Diane Perillo**, Director of Volunteer Engagement at Save the Children, for moderating each of these webinars and to PDG Dave Haradon for his technical skills in producing this webinar recording.

Model projects to ensure that education continues - in the midst of a pandemic and school closings



With schools closed and classes suspended all over the world as a result of the pandemic, teachers and parents have been challenged to keep students actively engaged in learning. Below are two examples of two Rotary supported programs that have been strategic in ensuring continuous learning though classes have been suspended (and continue to be suspended) for more than six months.

Camino Seguro, an education organization serving families who live in the neighborhood of the Guatemala City Dump, worked with Rotarians to provide education support and much needed food during the time of the lock-down. Teachers teams developed a process to connect with students to deliver instruction and meaningful learning activities. The process evolved from an initial (thick!) packet of paper/ pencil worksheets to creating assignments of self-paced, age-grade appropriate projects to instruction videos and two-way communication between teachers and students. One of the early challenges addressed by Camino Seguro was to ensure that all teachers had access to a computer, a smart phone, and a data plan so that they could work with each other and connect with students. Homework was collected every two weeks when food packets, feedback on previous lessons, and new assignments were distributed. The results: a return/ participation rate of over 90%. Learn more about this effort - that continues as schools remain closed: [Educating in a pandemic and beyond](#)





Another exemplary effort to continue engaging student during school closures was implemented by **EduGirls** in their schools in India. When the lockdowns came, lives of families on daily wages were torn apart. Girls were at risk of “being on the street” By distributing 600,000 meals to 1060 families, schools successfully avoided a major crisis. In fact, girls became

agents of family survival, not a liability to be married off. Previous investments in girls' education was safe for a while, but the challenges ahead were greater; The result was the organization's COVID Action Agenda (CAA to ensure that poverty itself does not prevent girls from getting an education they need to get out of poverty. Simply, to give girls living in poverty the same opportunity to get an education during the pandemic that better off children have.

The CAA includes five essential components to address and support distance learning:

1. Effective Digital Learning: teachers and girls were provided with digital devices loaded with syllabus linked software to continue digital learning. Unlike in computer labs, girls are allowed to take devices home to continue self learning. Devices are protected against use for other than school work. Siblings share a device. There are risks that devices will be lost, damaged or even sold: but the reward to risk ratio is very high to justify the program. Teacher training in digital teaching was provided.

2. Incentives for girls: students need to stay in school, learn and achieve excellence. During the pandemic, the girls felt greater pressure to pick up menial jobs to bring some income to the family at the cost of education. Financial incentives are provided to stay in school and show results so that parents can feel the learning and support their daughters.

3. Incentives for teachers: the important role of a teacher is now absolutely critical. They need to work smarter and harder to accelerate their progress to become teachers who plan well, interact effectively, promote problem solving over rote learning, integrate technology in lesson delivery and help girls master English. Effort and achievement is rewarded through an objective assessment and multi year support program of counseling and training for teachers.

4. Mentorship program: lack of face to face schooling disrupted the valuable bonds developed between teachers and girls, a bond beyond course work to counseling and personal development. This gap is filled by inviting senior girls, mothers and retired teachers living in the “bastis” to play this role for an honorarium.

5. Management and Monitoring: Board of Directors/Trustees at the Schools will implement the program and will meet with administrators monthly to re-view progress, make adjustments and monitor outcomes. Goals of this intervention include improvements over the previous year, enrollment rates sustained at high levels, early marriages will not happen and girls will stay on course to financial independence. End year results will be published as part of the overall monitoring system.

A \$39,000 Global Grant in 2016 created a partnership between Rotary International and Edu-GIRLS to create a school of excellence focused on taking girls living in poverty into financial independence. Potomac and BCC Clubs joined in with Jaipur Royal Rotary Club. Today, Mivmukti Girls School, Jaipur India may be the only non-profit school in India fighting the impact of COVID 19 on schooling of girls living in poverty using this holistic, no holds barred approach See the student's reaction to their new e-learning devices: [EduGirls3.mp4](#)

For more information, contact Rotarian Anand Seth, Founder of EduGirls

anandseth65@gmail.com

YOLK enables students to study at home using an innovative solar light

More children at Losimingori Primary School in rural Arusha, Tanzania, are being sent to school all because of a very special kind of cow. While some kids' parents used to keep them home to herd livestock, a new solar power system called a Solar Cow is encouraging families to send their kids to school to charge batteries and bring them home.

The system has been installed by Korea and US-based start-up, YOLK, in Losimingori school to provide families living in off-grid areas with power in return for sending their kids to class. We also have another pilot project in West Pokot County, Kenya.

The Solar Cow, which was one Time Magazine's top 100 inventions of 2019, allows kids to charge portable batteries, called Solar Milk, while they study and take them home to their parents at the end of the school day. This acts as a tangible incentive for low-income families to send their children to school instead of work to boost household income.

This initiative is important because too many kids are still being deprived of an education around the world. Some 258m children were out of school in 2018, according to a report by UNESCO.

School attendance is particularly low in rural off-grid areas of developing countries, where energy poverty often accompanies low incomes and learning opportunities. Our Solar Cow system aims to tackle the challenges of education access and energy poverty at once. Each Solar Milk battery provides enough electricity to charge a cell phone, power a radio and provide light at home. This handy charger and inbuilt light provides just the right amount and type of power required by families living at the bottom of the pyramid, who otherwise generally rely on kerosene oil for light and walk to charging kiosks to charge small devices.

Given that this is a valuable time and cost-saving service for parents, they are incentivized to send their kids to school in order to receive the charged batteries at the end of each school day. As far as we know, this is the first time that the benefits of green energy have been used as a reward for sending kids to school.

Having completed a successful pilot study that increased kids' school attendance by an average of almost one month in the school year, YOLK is now asking individuals and organisations to help provide more systems to schools in Tanzania.

YOLK has received initial grants from the Partnership for Green Growth (P4G), Korea International Cooperation Agency, which is the development agency of the Korean Government, and the philanthropic foundation of the conglomerate Hyundai. The Solar Cow has also won various design awards, including the "Tech for a Better World" award at the Consumer Electronics Show 2019, and been featured by news outlets including [Reuters](#) and the [Wall Street Journal](#).

YOLK is now launching a crowdfunding campaign where supporters can buy any number of batteries to contribute to our next system installation, or even a whole Solar Cow [to donate directly](#):

Each battery has a unique ID code which allows supporters to check users' attendance after the Solar Milk battery that they purchased has been put into use. People can also support Solar Cows by buying Solar Milk rechargeable batteries, which have a built-in flashlight and also function as a power bank. These can be a perfect Christmas gift for friends and family to



share the love of Solar Cows, with a percentage of proceeds of those batteries bought as gifts going to support Solar Cows in Africa. We hope that families will be using Solar Milk batteries to light up Christmas trees, homes and hearts this winter.

Please see our website for more details of the campaign, which is due to launch on November 10. <http://yolkstation.com/solar-cow-project/>



Media Literacy Should Start Early - and Last a Lifetime

Matthew Johnson, *Director of Education, Media Smarts*

Parents could be forgiven for thinking that our children are born media literate. They are mediatized, certainly, even before they are born: it's a rare baby shower that doesn't feature Elsa or Elmo in one form or another. As for digital literacy, kids take to devices like the proverbial ducks to water, quickly becoming expert at finding the videos and games they want.

It's essential, though, that we not mistake fluency for literacy. The average six-year-old is fully fluent in their native language, but rarely literate; most parents spend countless hours helping their kids learn to read, and we expect them to need a dozen years of schooling to become fully literate. In just the same way, our kids need digital and media literacy instruction in school and need us to guide and support them.

The difference, of course, is that many parents don't feel they know enough about digital and media literacy themselves to teach their kids. While it can seem like a complex topic, though, at its heart media literacy is about helping kids understand a small number of key concepts. These concepts are easy for us to learn and lay out a developmental path for our kids as they are able to understand more complex ideas and as their media habits change.

The first and most fundamental key concept is that media are constructions. Because we experience media in the same way we do reality, we have to consciously remind ourselves that it is not reality -- that it is constructed by people who made choices about what to include, what to leave out, and how those things that are included are presented. The difference between

media and reality is why media have social and political implications: any choice made by media makers communicates ideas about who is important, what is worth our attention, which actions are punished and which are rewarded. While these implications are the result of media makers' choices, though, audiences negotiate meaning as well, bringing their own viewpoints and experiences and, often, taking very different meanings from the same media texts. The meaning and interpretation of a text is influenced by the medium itself because each medium has a unique aesthetic form; media also have commercial implications, since most are made to make money and nearly all cost money to make. These concepts often overlap, of course: for example, the choices that lead to social and political implications – such as casting mostly white male actors as leads in movies – are often made on the basis of commercial considerations.

All of these concepts are as true for digital media as for traditional media, but there is one important difference: digital media are networked, moving us from being consumers at the end of a distribution chain to co-creators in an infinite network. Unlike in traditional media, where distribution was one of the biggest costs, with digital media it's typically free and almost effortless: as a result, digital media are shareable and persistent, able to spread virally and almost impossible to erase. Similarly, digital media have unexpected audiences because you can never be sure who will see what you share – and you might easily see content that you didn't mean to. Just as the medium of traditional media influences the message, digital media experiences are shaped by the tools we use, whether it's features like the endlessly scrolling newsfeeds that make it hard for us to look away from the screen or the algorithms that determine what we see on social networks and video streaming sites. Finally, because networked media is interactive, interactions through digital media can have a real impact – both in negative ways, as the things we say and do online can do real harm to others, and in positive ones, as kids have the ability to be full citizens online and to use digital tools to make a difference in their online and offline communities.

Though each of these key concepts is simple enough to understand (to make it even easier MediaSmarts has developed a series of short videos, [Media Literacy 101](#) and [Digital Literacy 101](#), that introduce and explain each one) the idea of teaching them all to our kids can be daunting. The good news is that there is no shortage of opportunities. When kids are young, taking advantage of the “why” phase can make a trip to the grocery store a media literacy experience: if your child asks why SpongeBob is on a cereal box, you can explain that it's because the people who designed the box (media are constructions) know that kids will ask their parents to buy it (media have commercial implications). You can then show them a cereal aimed at adults and ask how it's different (audiences negotiate meaning). Similarly, you can ask your kids if it's okay before you post a photo of them, explaining as clearly as possible who's likely to see them (digital media are shareable and persistent) so that by the time they're active on social media they're in the habit of getting consent before sharing other people's photos (interactions through digital media can have a real impact.)

Once we realize just how mediatized and digitized our lives are, it becomes clear that there are connections to media literacy everywhere. As our kids get older, these teachable moments will develop into opportunities to be co-learners with our kids, as we explore together everything from the complications of communicating by text and the long life of childhood photos. By



being open about the fact that we are learning alongside them, applying our understanding of media and digital literacy key concepts to new contexts and technologies, we can help them see that media education is not just for kids but for a lifetime.



Rotary's Partnerships: Global Partnership for Education

Praveen Prasad, Global Partnership for Education Secretariat and

Mary Jo Jean-François, RI Area of Focus Manager, Basic Education & Literacy

In October 2019, the Trustees of The Rotary Foundation and the Board of Rotary International approved a strategic partnership with the [Global Partnership for Education \(GPE\)](#). GPE is the largest global fund solely dedicated to transforming education in lower-income countries, and a unique, multi-stakeholder partnership. It works to deliver quality education so that every girl and boy can have hope, opportunity and agency. GPE works with close to 70 lower-income countries to help them build stronger, more effective education systems, and improve the volume, equity, and efficiency of domestic resources.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and Rotary International both know that public-private collaboration and partnership are fundamental in the pursuit and achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” Strong collaborative partnerships are essential, especially to ensure that the poorest and most marginalized children have an equal chance at quality and lifelong learning opportunities. That’s why, through a strategic alliance with the Ministry of Education, GPE and Rotary are partnering in ways that enhance and add unique value to Kenya’s efforts to strengthen the country’s education system.

Since 2005, GPE has supported [Kenya’s](#) impressive progress toward getting all children into school and learning. That progress, in turn, has advanced the country’s overall economic and social development. However, despite this remarkable progress in education and economic development, poor and disadvantaged Kenyan children from remote regions are less likely to attend or complete primary school.

Kenyan Rotarians have chosen Turkana County, the largest county located in north-western Kenya, as the focal regional to jumpstart the implementation of the partnership at the country level. In Turkana children continue to face deep economic and educational challenges. Issues such as generational poverty, distance to school, lack of access to learning materials and digital resources, and poor nutrition continue to impede children’s learning.

Working with GPE and the Kenyan Education Ministry, Rotary clubs and districts will be able to expand their impact by better understanding the national education sector plan, learning how to engage with the national and local governments to implement this plan and how to advocate

for equitable education, especially in resource-constrained and remote communities like Turkana and elsewhere in Kenya. It is through this partnership that we hope to enhance the lives of countless children in Kenya, by providing them high quality education, which will lead them to a brighter future for themselves and their country.

To find out more about the partnership with GPE, how to expand the partnership into your country or how you can be involved, please contact [Mary Jo Jean-Francois](#).



Stand Together for Girls Education in Uganda

Sandy Plamondon, Program Officer, Simameni Project,
International and Social Justice Program, Canadian Teachers' Federation

When I traveled to Uganda last February with my colleague and director Dan Martin, it marked the first of many visits I would likely make to the East African nation. When the plane touched down after nearly 20 hours in the air, I could barely contain my excitement.

As a three-time participant of Project Overseas, coupled with a teaching career in Canada and leading projects supporting the education of underprivileged students in Mexico, landing the job of leading efforts to improve girls' education in Uganda was the culmination of experience and a dream come true. When I walked out of the airport in Kampala and took those first breaths of warm Sub-Saharan air, the dream became reality. After months of planning and a multitude of meetings, the Simameni project was finally taking off!

Aimed at getting more girls into high school, along with creating better learning conditions, Simameni is a great source a pride for the CTF/FCE. After years without federal government funding for civil society development projects, Simameni marked a return to the country's involvement in helping build equity beyond Canada's borders. So, when we wrapped up two weeks of workshops with government, education, and community leaders the 5-year project was off and running. Then, less than a month later, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, everything came to a grinding halt.

In Canada, this year's return to school has produced many mixed emotions. From the usual excitement that September brings, to the ever-present sense of dread and anxiety felt by educators, students, and parents. Although only the beginning, so far this school year feels like we're already behind and playing catch up.

The pandemic has exposed existing inequalities in our own education systems. Ranging from poverty, gender-based violence, and the lack of physical and virtual connectivity, the pandemic has put our most vulnerable students at greater risk. Our kids returned to school in early September and, six weeks later, we are already seeing the negative effects of the pandemic on our teachers and students. All of this is occurring in Canada, a fully developed country. Now,

try to imagine what the return to school will look like in a country like Uganda, where schools are scheduled to reopen this week after being shuttered for more than six months.

As Ugandan schools prepare to unlock their doors, the Simameni project is ready to move forward. Even though conditions are likely to vastly differ from the beginning of the year, the aim of the project is the same: to improve access, retention, and educational opportunities for secondary school-aged girls in selected communities of the country's Western and Teso regions.

Simameni, which means 'Stand up' in Swahili, seeks to influence values and gender norms within the Ugandan society, to show the benefits and advantages of secondary school education for girls, and to improve the conditions in schools to make them safe, welcoming, responsive, and inclusive for girls. No small feat, but critical to address even under the cloud of COVID-19

Like the Government of Canada, the CTF/FCE believes that supporting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is the best way to build a more peaceful, more inclusive, and more prosperous world. We believe that women and girls can be agents of change, improving not only their lives and the lives of their families, but also strengthening their communities, and countries when they are given equal opportunities.

Simameni is a collaboration with our long-time partner, the Uganda National Teachers' Union (UNATU). When the Ugandan government closed all schools, sending millions of students home in March, both UNATU and the CTF/FCE recognized that the project had instantly become more important.

With distance and virtual learning a challenge at best due to a lack of internet connection, Uganda is also starved for extracurricular opportunities, leaving students unable to pursue activities while schools are closed. With students and teachers unable to meet in person, the only option for many students in terms of continuity of learning are the lessons delivered via the radio.

Despite the challenges, this situation has also created opportunities for the Simameni team to be creative, to find other ways to adapt to the new normal and to reach our objectives through different strategies. Through these alternatives, we are happy to report that Simameni is moving forward despite the pandemic!

At the beginning of September, colleagues from UNATU took advantage of the country's prudent reopening to meet with religious, community, political, and educational leaders, and to hold meetings in the two Simameni project regions, Teso and Western. Together, they are working on developing ways to achieve the project's goals.

Accessing and staying in school is hard enough for vulnerable children, especially girls, at the best of times. Without school, a place of safety as well as education, home confinement also means that girls and young women are exposed to higher risks of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Pregnancies, which occur during the pandemic, will have a long-term effect by creating permanent barriers for girls once the crisis is over. Moreover, since March, health services have been focussed on the fight against COVID-19, and not on sexual and reproductive health, which means that adolescent girls and young women have been put at an even greater risk.

The pandemic has also shown that in many societies, including Uganda, women and girls take on the majority of unpaid domestic, childcare, and healthcare tasks, which increased when schools and workplaces closed, and people were confined to home. This context has made them more exposed and vulnerable to the virus.



While it is difficult to predict the long-term impacts of the pandemic on girls' access to education and learning opportunities, we already know that the losses will be significant and the drop-out rates higher. Even before this crisis, we were far from seeing gender equality in education. The longer COVID-19 persists, the greater the gap will become. Because COVID-19 has made girls' eventual return to school so uncertain and so complex, the Simameni project is more important than ever.

What are your Rotary Club's BEL projects? Large or small, local or international, share them with your BELRAG colleagues! The BELRAG newsletter is a perfect way to share projects that are impactful and replicable. If your project would benefit by more Rotarian involvement or support, do share information in the BELRAG newsletter. Information about best practices in any facet of literacy or education are of great interest:

early childhood education

adult education

education for girls or reducing gender disparity

programs for out of school or underperforming youth

effective use of technology in education

access to literacy resources & libraries

Articles should be 500-750 words and include 1-2 photos (high resolution in JPEG)

Send information to [Carolyn Johnson](mailto:Carolyn.Johnson@rotary.org)

www.LITRAG.org