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Rotary sponsors program to help Iraqis

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Jaime Ciavarra
Staff Writer

The Montgomery Village Rotary Club co-hosted a meeting at the Bahrain Embassy Monday night to launch its next effort to help American citizens understand the Arab world.

Rotary representatives from Montgomery Village and the Washington area joined ambassadors from six Arab countries, including the ambassadors of Iraq and Bahrain, at a meeting that introduced a project to help give prosthetic legs to disabled Iraqi children.

"We need to continue our friendship with the Arab world," said Linda Smythe, chairwoman of the International Lane project. "Part of the Rotarian objective is to promote international understanding, and move beyond the bad press that Arab people are getting."

The project is a continuation of the club's effort to clear up misunderstandings between Americans and Arabs, she said. In October the Montgomery Village club sponsored Friendship Caravan, a five-day event in Gaithersburg that featured a variety of cultural and educational events.

International Lane is a partnership between the Rotary Club and Physicians for Peace, a nonprofit organization that provides medical care to needy areas around the world. Both organizations are seeking to help fund a current facility in Basra, Iraq, which does not have the technical staff or storage to accommodate patients waiting to be treated, Smythe said.

Physicians for Peace sent two members to the area for a fact-finding mission in October, where they discovered that nearly 5,000 people -- most of them children -- were awaiting prosthetic treatment, said Harold Bernsen, a retired Navy admiral and president of the Physicians for Peace board of trustees.

The members met with an orthopedic doctor who ran a prosthetic clinic with six or seven technicians. The clinic used out-of-date equipment, and the physicians did not have the latest training, he said.

"The clinic was very rudimentary," Bernsen said. "They were run on a shoestring, basically."

Physicians for Peace has raised money, obtained prosthetic limbs and trained technicians and doctors in orthopedic clinics in Turkey and the Dominican Republic already, and Iraq was another targeted country, Bernsen said. The Montgomery Village Rotary Club and other Rotaries in Virginia and Maryland will assist with the funding, he added.

Bernsen and Smythe are associated through another organization, he said. Smythe was particularly interested in Bernsen's involvement in the project and initiated the partnership.

"The real value of this project is the connection with the people," said Glen Todd, Montgomery Village Rotary Club president. "We're not just sending money out, we're getting involved -- and asking other clubs to get involved -- in a cause that affects so many."

The club has wanted to get involved in a project like this for some time, and the Physicians for Peace initiative was a catalyst to start the effort, Todd added.

Smythe presented the project to about 100 Rotary Club members from the Washington area Monday night, looking for support, she said. The Montgomery Village Rotary Club will begin taking pledges and donations for the project

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immediately, and is looking into obtaining prosthetic limbs, Smythe added.

When the project is funded and the Basra area secure, Physicians for Peace will send over approximately five technicians and physicians to train the Iraqi physicians and set up more-modern facilities, Bernsen said. The first mission will take about 10 days, with two or three follow-up missions months later, he said.

The organization chose Basra because it is in a less dangerous part of the country, he added, although Physicians for Peace is interested in doing projects throughout Iraq.

The Iraqi ambassador to the United States, Rend Rahim, was the guest speaker at the Rotary Club meeting and shared her vision for a peaceful country, Smythe said.


"We want to spread this level of participation worldwide," Smythe added.



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