

Ride to end polio: Rotary 'Moto' raises funds in South Texas

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By Denise Cathey, Photojournalist

As the convoy of motorcyclists approaches the Sunrise Mall, members of the Rotary Club of Brownsville Sunrise Club cheer and wave their hands. The riders from the Rotary Club of Laredo pull into the parking lot, music blaring from their speakers as they dismount and take a break from their ride from Harlingen with fellow Rotary members.

The stop at Sunrise Mall is part of an annual 800 mile ride fundraiser known as the Rotary Polio Moto ride in partnership with other Rotary Clubs to raise money for Rotary International's mission to end polio worldwide.

"Out of all the things that Rotary International is involved in, one of the biggest is the eradication of polio off the face of the Earth," said Lizandro Garcia, Rotary Club of Brownsville Sunrise Club Treasurer and Assistant District Governor for Area 9 in the organization.

Part of that effort is a yearly fundraiser where each club commits funds raised throughout the year from their own events for Rotary International to go where help is needed the most to fight polio.

"We still need vaccines and resources to send doctors to those countries." said Bettsy Pizano, President of the Rotary Club of Brownsville Sunrise.

While the Rotary Polio Moto ride normally takes place in March, the group was forced to postpone it due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Today is actually World Polio Day and since we were going to postpone it, what better day to do the Polio Moto ride than to start it on World Polio Day," said Mike Dickerson, the Polio Moto chair for Rotary Club of Laredo and frontrider of the convoy.

The two day ride starts in Laredo, Texas, and swings through South Texas to eventually reach Corpus Christi before the riders circle back to Laredo. At each stop the riders meet with local Rotary Club members to receive their donation to help fund the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.

Rotary Club of Brownsville Sunrise Club charter member, Luis Cavazos passes out snacks to Rotary Polio Moto riders Francisco and Sylvia Ortiz Saturday as they take a break from their ride in Brownsville outside Sunrise Mall. (Denise Cathey/The Brownsville Herald)

"It combines my passions, Rotary and motorcycle riding. So It's a great opportunity to get a kitchen pass to be able go and do an 800 mile ride around South Texas and have the support of my wife who is also a Rotarian," said Dickerson.

Each year the riders add over \$10,000 from fundraisers by clubs throughout South Texas. Every dollar raised by Rotary Club International is matched 2-for-1 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Rotary Club of Brownsville Sunrise Club added \$1,130 to the effort from their own fundraising events throughout the year before the pandemic began.

"We were very lucky that our major fundraiser has to do with Charro Days, so our 2020 funds we were able to secure because that was one of the last things that happened here in the city and we were able to still do our fundraiser successfully," Garcia said.

For Garcia being able to be a part of this effort has taken on a special significance during the pandemic.

"Polio back then was kind of seen like this pandemic that we are going through today. So putting that into perspective, it's a whole life-changing experience being able to be a part of that and just be a little drop in that big bucket to be able to eradicate something that's now been around more than 50 years.. that's really what plays into it for me," Garcia said.

Today, polio remains endemic in only Pakistan and Afghanistan, giving Rotary Club members hope that soon polio will be gone forever due to their joint efforts.



"We are so close to finishing and removing polio from the world," Pizano said.

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