

PORTSMOUTH

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Artist Alex de Steiguer is no stranger to the wildness of nature, particularly the sea's wrath come winter. She has been the caretaker of the Isles of Shoals for 28 winters. Read about her experience on page 32.

Photography:
Alex de Steiguer

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REPAIRING LIVES, RESTORING HOPE



Portsmouth Rotary mission trip to India provides no-cost surgeries with life-changing impact

ARTICLE BY ANN KATHRYN KELLY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON CHICK

30 GIVING BACK | LIFE + CULTURE

On an early morning in September, Midge Nelson watched a room in an Indian hospital fill with men, women, and children. They queued into two lines. Nelson, an account executive with USI Insurance Services and current president of the Rotary Club of Portsmouth, was behind a desk, paperwork



“I keep doing this because the need for people in these countries is so dire. And the results, so life-changing.”

spread before her. Fellow Rotarian Yvonne Legge, a financial advisor with Morgan Stanley and a past president of Portsmouth Rotary, sat beside her.

Nelson and Legge would spend 12 hours pre-registering people for free reconstructive surgeries. The room never seemed to empty. Women carried crying babies. Men held the hands of shy children. Every other person standing before Nelson and Legge was either severely disfigured from burns or from cleft lip and/or palate.

“I thought I knew what to expect, going in,” Nelson admits, “but nothing prepares you for something like that.” Nelson saw hope in every person’s eyes and it was clear to her how much they wanted to be selected for this life-changing surgery. She also sensed their apprehension. The room was busy and loud, and she and Legge relied on interpreters to help as they pre-qualified people. “The emotional experience far surpassed what I expected,” she adds.

Following pre-registration, photos were taken of every person seeking surgery. Numbers were written on arms. Each met with plastic surgeons who determined those eligible and those disqualified from incompatible blood tests, malnourishment, or because their disfigurement was too severe to resolve in the day surgeries scheduled for that week.

Nelson and Legge were among nine Portsmouth Rotarians who traveled to Faridabad, India, on a two-week mission trip. Gary Nadeau, Butch Ricci, Don Chick, Leonard Seagren, Kevin Shultz, Ann Bliss, and Tatijana Shone joined them as non-medical volunteers. Rotaplast International, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit whose name means Rotary Plastic Surgery, coordinated a medical team of 20 additional volunteers from across the United States: plastic surgeons, pediatricians, anesthesiologists, dentists, OR nurses, and a COVID-19 safety officer. Rotaplast has performed free surgeries through medical mission trips to more

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Bottom: Yvonne Legge and Midge Nelson



than 21,000 patients around the world since 1993. The Portsmouth club raised \$100,000 to sponsor the Rotaplast trip.

“We were the funding partner,” Nelson explains, “and because we paid for all medical supplies and airfare for everyone, including medical volunteers, our club could send up to 10 support staff.”

On the ground in Faridabad, a city near Delhi, the team set up three operating rooms at Amrita Hospital. They evaluated more than 110 Indian children and adults to determine care during the pre-clinic day Nelson described, then sprang into action the next day, providing reconstructive surgeries to more than 50 patients through nearly 80 procedures. All in 10 days, with provided services valued at more than \$440,000.

Cleft lips and palates affect one in 700 children, most commonly in developing nations. The deformity impacts speech, causes critical dental issues, and presents a choking hazard, aside from crushing social stigma. Malnutrition is the primary cause, impacting young women even before they’re pregnant, then transferring to fetuses.

“It’s amazing to see a child’s or adult’s life transformed with a few hours of surgery,” Legge shares. “They move from being outcasts to healing within two weeks and now accepted by society.” She says the surgery is quick and uncomplicated. “The before and after photos say it all.”

Leonard Seagren agrees. Seagren helped in the OR, sterilizing and sorting instruments. The trip to India was his third Rotaplast mission; he previously went to Togo and Bangladesh. “I keep doing this because the need for people in these countries is so dire,” he points out. “And the results, so life-changing.”

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Leonard Seagren
and Kevin Shultz

The Rotary Club of Portsmouth is a dynamic group of more than 150 people from across the Seacoast: doctors and lawyers, realtors and bankers, landscapers and artists, police, fire and municipal professionals, corporate and nonprofit executives, and small business owners. The Portsmouth club rolls up to Rotary International, the world’s largest service organization with 1.2 million members and 35,000 clubs in 200 countries that live by the motto: “Service Above Self.”

While Portsmouth Rotary supports globally ambitious programs like Rotaplast, the club also fundraises and donates more than \$200,000 each year right back into our community. The club’s annual Christmas tree drive and sale of limited-edition brass ornaments featuring

Seacoast landmarks raises proceeds that fund annual scholarships to Portsmouth High School seniors, and grants to local nonprofits. They host a Thanksgiving meal each year with the Greek Orthodox Church in Portsmouth, open to all. They assemble and ship care boxes to military personnel, volunteer at the Seacoast-area Salvation Army soup kitchen, and organize food drives for local pantries.

They meet each Thursday at 12:15 pm at the Portsmouth Country Club in Greenland. Visiting Rotarians and anyone from the community are welcome to join them for lunch and a club meeting. Learn more about the many ways Portsmouth Rotary serves, and how you can get involved, at PortsmouthRotary.org.