

# Rotarians trek across Borneo for polio

The Rotarian -- April 2012

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In November, eight Rotarians climbed Mount Kinabalu, one of the highest mountains in Asia.

“We wanted to do something for polio that made Rotarians turn and say, ‘They’re mad!’” recalls Chee Woh Leong, of the Rotary Club of Johore Bahru, Malaysia.

To reach the peak, the climbers – all but one from District 3310, which also includes Brunei and Singapore – first hiked 200 miles over the remote, mountainous terrain of Sabah State on the island of Borneo.

“Apart from a handful of villages, we were in the middle of nowhere,” Leong says. “Daybreaks over the mountains were always beautiful, the early misty mornings almost magical.”

The group started from the city of Sandakan and ended at the District 3310 Conference in Kota Kinabalu.

“We are not supreme athletes. We are ordinary Rotarians attempting something out of the ordinary,” Leong says, noting that the team trained for months before setting out. “All of us will remember this for the rest of our lives.”

Local media covered the trek, generating valuable PR and donations for Rotary’s Challenge. “It took us 12 days,” Leong says. “But that’s nothing compared with Rotary’s journey to end polio.”

*Here follows, the full "interview" with Jenny Llakmani of The Rotarian:*

7<sup>th</sup> January 2012

Hi Jenny

Happy New Year to you and to all at Editorial. All the best for 2012!

Your questions are answered below:

1. Why did District 3310 decide to do this walk, and how did you determine the length and route?

We did it for polio eradication! We did it to rouse the spirits of Rotarians. We needed something out of the ordinary, something crazy! The human spirit is capable of wonderful things but sometimes it lies dormant for a while and needs to be roused. We wanted to bring awareness to Rotarians, and the public, about Rotary's fight to end polio, motivate them to contribute and to raise funds in support of Rotary's US\$200 Million Challenge. It was a nice piece of PR too, we received good exposure in the media.

We wanted something that made Rotarians turn and say, "they're mad!". To many, just climbing Mt Kinabalu is tough, never mind the 320km walk, most of it over mountainous terrain. We started at sea-level in Sandakan on the east coast of Sabah, crossed the Crocker Range, reached it's highest point (Low's Peak, Mt Kinabalu, 4,095m) and descended to sea-level again in Kota Kinabalu on the west coast. Sabah's countryside is very remote. Apart from a handful of villages and shanty towns, we were at most times, in the middle of nowhere. We first thought it couldn't be done for 2 reasons: lack of supply of drinking water and the absence of suitable places to rest and sleep in some areas along the route but we managed to overcome these logistical difficulties.

Sabah is also the 'home territory' of our current district governor, Zainie Aucasa. He was our instigator and chief supporter, closely involved in our planning from the start. So it's quite fitting to have it in Sabah. Furthermore we would finish at the venue of our district conference in Kota Kinabalu. Sandakan was a natural place to start since we have 2 Rotary clubs there. We had a good send-off.

Well, it took us 12 days. But that's nothing compared with Rotary's journey to end polio. That's 26 years and counting.

2. What were some of the memorable moments?

The whole thing was an adventure with many memorable moments. We were a group of 8 from various corners of a diverse district coming together for the first time. Mind you, we are not supreme athletes, none of us are. We are just ordinary Rotarians attempting something out of the ordinary. Age-wise, all but 2 of us are well into our second half-century. But of course, we had to train for it, for months. We couldn't have just walked in and did it.

None of us knew each other well but got to do so gradually along the way. We had fun and a lot of laughs. All of us will surely remember this for the rest of our lives. Most of all, we have the pleasure of having survived it and done something together as a team to help eradicate polio.

If we have to pick one standout moment, it was when we reached the peak of Mt Kinabalu. After 6 days of walking, the climb was really very tough! We struggled but were rewarded by the awesome beauty that surrounded us - carpets of cloud that rolled out before and below us, protruding peaks and a vast, clear blue sky. Truly an amazing sight and an amazing feeling of being, literally and figuratively, on top of the world!

Oh yes, daybreaks over the mountains were always beautiful; misty early mornings almost magical.

3. What is the total amount of money that you raised?

We did not set out to raise money, not directly. We wanted to motivate and inspire. The fund-raising was carried out by Rotarians and clubs throughout the district. Rotarians contributed, and worked to raise funds from the public. This is still going on.

We have a target of at least US\$100,000 for the district in this Rotary Year. We are almost there. I think we will or will soon exceed this target. At this moment, the money is still coming in. Several clubs have still to carry out projects planned to raise funds for polio eradication.

4. How many Rotarians, and how many non-Rotarians, participated? Was everyone Malaysian?

Of the 8 in the Team, 7 are Rotarians and one former Rotaractor. For details please see Item No. 8 here: <http://www.rotarydistrict3310.org.my/index.php/2011/05/trans-sabah-walk-climb/>

More than 200 other Rotarians, spouses, families and friends joined us on the last leg on the last day to finish at the conference venue. There were members of clubs in and around Kota Kinabalu and those who have come to attend the district conference.

5. Where did you stay along the way? Were you hosted by Rotarians along the route?

How we wish we could stay with Rotarians! But Sabah is remote and there are no Rotary clubs anywhere between Sandakan and the vicinity of Kota Kinabalu ....

We stayed in budget hotels with very basic facilities, often with no more than just a bed and shower. But these were scarce and not always available at our daily stops. On these occasions we were ferried forward or backward in our support vehicles to an available hotel and ferried again the next morning back to where we had stopped and continued walking from there.

6. Is District 3310 planning another walk like this one?

Haha, not in a hurry! But I must say, it was something that worked very well. We achieved what we set out to do and the response from Rotarians in the district was very satisfying.

I might add that the safety of the team members was paramount. We started each morning at 2 am to avoid the afternoon heat which can be as high as 45 degrees Celsius. For the first several hours we would be walking in pitch darkness. We had on us reflective vests and body strips, headlamps and blinking lights. When together in a group we must have appeared as if an UFO had landed!

As much as possible, we would be walking just ahead and shielded by our support vehicles.

Thanks Jenny, and if you need anything else, please let me know.

Best regards  
Chee Woh