

DG Ed Announces Foundation Seminar Keynote for Nov. 7



Deepa Willingham

Deepa Willingham, founder of a school for girls in India, will address the RI Convention on 24 June. The winery owner, financial officer for BBW Energy, and member of the Rotary Club of Santa Ynez Valley, Calif., USA, established Promise of Assurance to Children Everywhere (PACE Universal) in 2003.

My father was president of a college. He taught me that education gives you the ability to find a job and to make important decisions. So, when [Rotary Foundation Trustee Chair and 2003-04 RI President] Jonathan Majiyagbe encouraged Rotarians to educate girls, I felt inspired. I talked to my husband, and then to my Rotary club. We partnered with the Rotary Club of Calcutta Metropolitan, and that was a blessing.

The board of directors at PACE thought it would be best to operate in the city of my birth. We built our first school 45 kilometers [28 miles] from Kolkata, in Piyali Junction. It is a simple building – a cement floor right now. It is a rented facility. We put the girls in one room, and we started educating them. Four or five months into it, we were able to separate them because they were learning at different speeds.

The center combines education, services, and community empowerment. You help them start climbing the ladder, and soon the community changes. Females who are educated are more likely to marry later, have fewer children, and launch businesses.

We lost two girls whose parents married them off when they were 13. Another girl, it took five years for her to tell the principal, “I need your help; my father rapes me every night.” After DNA testing, her father was arrested. Her mother wanted to sell her. The Kolkata Rotarians made arrangements so she is now in a licensed women’s shelter. Because of her courage, we are going to put a dorm in for the older girls.

In 2006, I took the first group of U.S. kids to go work at the school. It was one of the highlights of my year as Rotary club president. We raffled off a Mustang. We raised \$45,000. We held a contest for all the juniors and seniors in the Santa Ynez Valley. They read *The City of Joy*, about

Kolkata, and wrote a 1,000-word essay. Six kids were chosen to go work for two and a half weeks. The trip changed their lives.

We have about 100 girls at the school. More than 200 are on a waiting list. Each girl is sponsored by someone in the United States, who pays \$180 per year to cover books, meals, lodging, and teacher salaries. I have donated \$150,000, and other sponsors – including the Rotary Club of Santa Ynez Valley, my club – have brought the total to \$500,000.

I go to the school two times each year. I just got back. We have a whole bunch of new girls. They call me *Dida*, which means “grandma.” My dream is to do five of these schools before I die. We cannot have a safe planet without eradicating extreme poverty.