

Through Kiwanis, an unlikely connection between Poquoson and Mongolia

Poquoson Kiwanis Club's unprecedented relationship with a group from Mongolia to help them create the country's first standalone Kiwanis.

By **Marie Albiges**

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About 6,556 miles away from the city of Poquoson sits a school that primarily serves mentally or physically disabled students ages 8 to 18.

Called School 55, the building, which looks like an old barracks, sits in the heart of downtown Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia and home to some 1.4 million people.

The school holds 500 students and 120 faculty and staff who have been receiving school supplies, coats, books, clothing and shoes from the Poquoson Kiwanis Club for the past six years, and who will soon — thanks to the help of Poquosans — charter their own Kiwanis club, the first of its kind in Mongolia.

Spreading the mission

In the spring of 2012, the smell of barbecue lured Arima Marder to Poquoson Kiwanis member Terry Johnson.

Over a meal of pulled pork at the club's annual pig roast, Johnson shared the mission of Kiwanis — to improve the lives of children — and explained its reach to 80 countries since its founding in 1915 and its local fundraising efforts.

Marder, a Mongolian native who had moved to Poquoson in 2007, wondered — if the goal was to improve children's lives globally, would Kiwanis be willing to extend its reach thousands of miles to a school she knew needed help?

In the years following that chance encounter, the Poquoson Kiwanis club sent 25 boxes of books, 10 boxes of clothing and shoes, nine computers and seven boxes of school supplies to School 55. The club also dedicated \$11,500 to spreading Kiwanis's mission to Mongolia.

Meanwhile, Marder became a member and used her ties to Mongolia to connect deeper with teachers.

'My heart goes to Mongolia'

For almost 70 years, Mongolia was a communist society under the rule of the Soviet Union. In 1990, a democratic revolution was born, and the country is still transforming, Marder said.

Marder said she is part of the first generation to emigrate to the U.S. under this new Mongolian democracy.

"My heart goes to Mongolia all the time," she said.

The country faces issues of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, air pollution and students dropping out of school.

A [2016 United Nations report](#) found that 66.2 percent of disabled youth — which the U.N. describes as between 15 and 24 years old — are enrolled in education.

The report found almost half of the youth with congenital disabilities have no education or are illiterate. That's partly because the teachers don't have the training skills and the institutions don't have accessible infrastructure.

When Marder was introduced to Kiwanis, she was also introduced to the act of volunteering, and she realized she could use the power of Kiwanis to help children in her native country.

"It opened my eyes," she said.

She felt it was her mission to spread the word of what it means to give back to her fellow Mongolians, and she began working with School 55's principal, Ganbileg Ulaanbaatar (her place of origin is used as a last name) to recruit teachers to be part of a Poquoson Kiwanis Club satellite committee.

After the Kiwanis club paid for Ganbileg to come to Poquoson, where she learned about area schools' special education programs and implemented those programs in School 55, it was Poquoson Kiwanis member Bob Kerlinger's turn to visit Ulaanbaatar.

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— Poquoson Kiwanis Club member Bob Kerlinger

While there, he recruited 18 members to join the satellite committee.

“This idea of going out and working, to just give it away, was just totally foreign to them. They'd never seen anything like that,” he said.

Once they had embraced the idea of volunteerism, the 18 members were inducted into the Poquoson Kiwanis Club as a satellite committee via video conference with the help of Marder, who was translating for both parties.

“It was just awesome,” Kerlinger said. “To see that it all worked, that it actually happened, was just awesome.”

Next steps

But the work didn't stop there. The goal was to charter Mongolia's first club with these 18 new members.

To do that, they needed Kiwanis members a little closer to Mongolia that could provide onsite educational leadership training on Kiwanis.

Since China and Russia, Mongolia's closest neighbors, don't have Kiwanis clubs, the Poquoson club turned to the Tokyo club, which agreed to sponsor the Mongolians.

Now, a date — Nov. 10 — has been set for the new Mongolian club will be chartered.

“Step by step — and that's the beauty of this entire thing — it's evolved, and we've run into an obstacle, and we found a way around it. And in every one of those steps, we've found something else, some other way to move in the direction we needed to,” Johnson said.

The future club's major projects include building a greenhouse that will provide nutritious meals to students as well as teach them how to grow produce.

Members also hope to raise money to purchase prostheses for a few amputee students.

In the months after the Mongolian Kiwanis Club is chartered, Poquoson will continue to help on a project basis and to recruit members, Kerlinger said.

Johnson said back home in Poquoson, club members are excited about the future of the Mongolian club.

“They are proud of what we're doing,” he said.

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