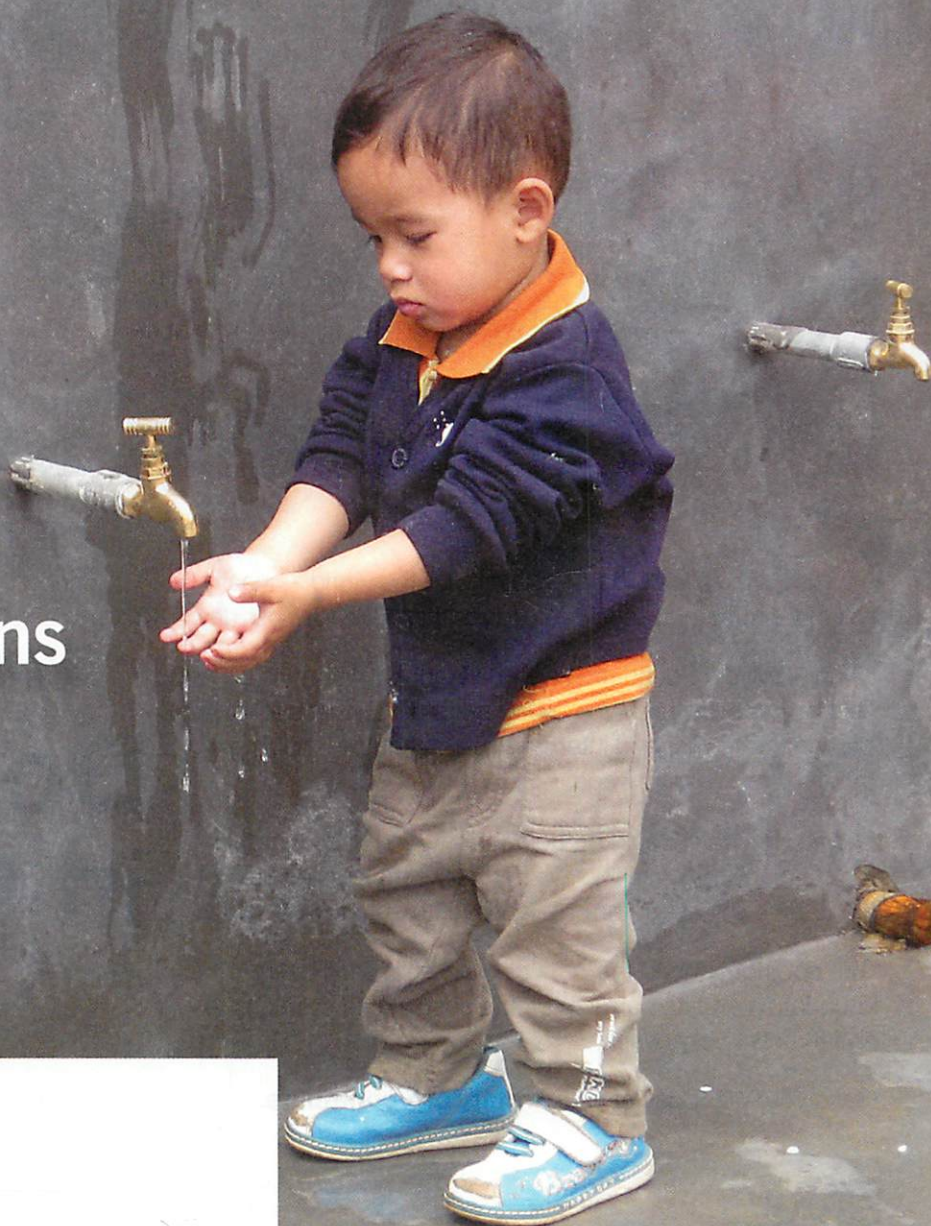


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Simple gifts,
lasting solutions



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PROJECT HELPING HAND

Small grants pay off big for students

At a middle school in Monterey, Calif., USA, music teacher Jim Paoletti needs to replace old strings on orchestra instruments. With no spare money



in the school budget, he gives up hope – until he hears about an outside source of funding. He fills out a simple online application, agrees to submit receipts, and promises that every cent will go toward replacing the strings. Shortly afterward, a check arrives for the full amount: \$489.50.

“When the kids played with new strings for the first time, their faces lit up,” Paoletti says. “The difference is like stepping up from a minivan to a Porsche.”

At a nearby elementary school, a kindergarten teacher, Stacy Gnibus, receives enough

money from the same source to build raised garden beds on the playground so her students can grow vegetables and flowers with their own hands.

If these scenarios sound like scaled-down episodes of that old TV show *The Millionaire*, there’s a reason: The sums, though small, are as effective and appreciated as many much-larger grants. And though there’s no John Beresford Tipton handing out million-dollar checks to deserving recipients, there’s his contemporary surrogate, Greg Migdale, opening new vistas of discovery for local students.

Several years ago, Migdale was a man with a good idea. He did his research and found that good ideas hold currency in Rotary, so he joined the Rotary Club of Monterey Peninsula-Sunrise and pitched the project. He explained that in California’s cash-strapped public education system, enrichments such as art supplies and field trips are the first to be eliminated when money is tight. “All the things that make education interesting, that make you want to learn, are the things that have been cut,” Migdale noted.

He chose the name Project Helping Hand. “We’re not here to do the real work,” says Migdale, a 40-year-old real-estate appraiser whose mother, Lorraine Gerstl, is a third-grade Monterey school-teacher. “That’s done by the teachers. We’re here to help them with the heavy lifting they do every day.”

Club members liked the idea of putting funds directly into teachers’ hands but persuaded Migdale to pare down his initial plan, which was to serve all of Monterey County – a sprawling expanse of poor



VERN FISHER/MONTEREY COUNTY HERALD

farming communities, fog-drenched broccoli and artichoke fields, vineyards, horse ranches, and upscale towns like Carmel. They urged him to focus on the local area so the club could monitor the project's performance. Club members contributed an initial \$3,000, and a grant from the district provided another \$1,500.

"The beauty of Greg's idea was the simplicity of it," says fellow Rotarian Ted Balestreri, who now serves on the club committee that evaluates applications.

Migdale solicited help from an elementary school principal, Jone Amador, and a school board member, Elizabeth Pannetta. Together, they designed a simple set of requirements. Teachers come up with the initial funding request. The school's principal must sign off on the application, and the Project Helping Hand committee votes on it. The contract stipulates that the grant money will be used solely for the purpose indicated on the request, and that all receipts must be turned in.

Project Helping Hand has given more than \$20,000 to Monterey schoolteachers over the past three years, in small amounts that belie their true value: \$1,000 to fund a field trip to the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose, \$477 to buy a microscope, \$300 for an alphabet rug, \$500 for an accelerated reading program, \$1,000 for the raised garden beds.

"We couldn't have built the garden as well as it turned out without the Rotary club," says



Opposite page: Music sounds sweeter to middle school students after a grant from Project Helping Hand allowed their teacher, Jim Paoletti, to replace the strings on their instruments. **This page:** Kindergartners in Stacy Gnibus' class can watch their food grow in garden beds funded by the project.

Gnibus, who also received help from Rotarian volunteers. "They brought most of the tools we needed, plus the expertise, including three architects. There were as many Rotary club members as parents, plus a bunch of kids. They

made nine boxes – two more than we expected. We've planted strawberries, several flower species, peas, and different lettuces. A few weeks back, I heard one of my kindergartners let out a loud squeal. I ran over, and she's next to a box,

pointing and shouting, 'I see a strawberry, I see a strawberry!'"

The club created Project Helping Hand with a certain type of teacher in mind. "There's always going to be a group of teachers who have fire in the belly, the desire, the intelligence – all those factors that can have such a huge effect on someone's life," Migdale says. "And when we help them ignite passion and excitement in their students, that's the payoff. I had a friend who became a scientist because she went on a field trip to an observatory near San Francisco in the second grade. She told me that it opened her mind to science. And it shaped what she did with her life."

Migdale is working with Balestreri and others on a strategy to expand Project Helping Hand to Rotary clubs across the state. He wants to keep it simple, for teachers and for Rotarians. He has posted a blueprint with instructions for replicating the effort on the project website.

"This project," he says, "is self-serving in some ways. When I'm old and these kids are running the world, I want them to have had a well-rounded education. I want them to be empathetic and community minded. With the direction schools are headed, the kids are not exposed to the richness of the world. It's a giant problem to tackle, but to bring down a giant, you first have to find its thumb."

– STEPHEN YAFA

Learn more at www.projecthelpinghandrotary.org.