‘Selfless Service’

In Action

BY JOHN BRADEN ’06

Dr. Jack McCullough ’70 joined a Traveling Aggies trip to the Amazon in February 2006 to “travel with fellow Aggies and experience this great river.” He and his wife, ElaRuth, had been on Traveling Aggies trips before, but this one turned out differently. What he would experience on that trip would touch his Aggie Spirit and spur him to lead an effort to save the lives of thousands of children and adults in villages along the river. >>
McCullough graduated from Texas A&M in 1970 with a doctorate in biology. As a professor of environmental science at Stephen F. Austin University, he studies water and its effects on the environment, so he was interested in seeing the greatest highway of water on the planet, with four times the discharge of the Congo and more than 10 times the amount carried by the Mississippi River.

“The Amazon River trip was well done as always,” he said, “but this trip was different because we really generated heartfelt concern about the health of the villagers we met. All of the little kids seemed to be emaciated.” He would learn that among the leading causes of death for Amazon River villagers are internal parasites such as hookworms. Hookworms infect every person in the small villages along the river and cause weakened immune systems. That, in turn, means even ailments as minor as a cold can be fatal. “It’s not difficult to rid somebody of those intestinal parasites and it’s a shame the people of Peru can’t get medical care,” McCullough said. “I became determined to do something about it.”

A week after returning home from Peru, ElaRuth and McCullough attended an international Rotary training seminar. He went as the 2006-07 Rotary District 5910 governor, but he had a plan. The couple sought out Rotary district governors from South America to talk about the problems they had seen on their trip. From those talks, McCullough began to think of ways that he could coordinate an international project to help Amazon villagers using donations from Rotary Clubs in America and working jointly with the Rotary Club in Iquitos, Peru.

“With money I had collected I was able to write a grant to Medical Assistance Program International,” McCullough said. “This group is funded in large part by pharmaceutical companies, and they were more than willing to help. MAP contacted a company in Great Britain and purchased 10,000 doses of the medication. The people at MAP suggested that the best way to deliver the medication to Peru would be to deliver it personally to ensure safe passage through customs.” So in May 2007, the McCulloughs, along with friend and translator Fred Sandburg, traveled to Lima, Peru. The three Americans met up with a team from the Iquitos Rotary Club and traveled the remaining 640 miles to Iquitos, an Amazon River port in northeastern Peru. The Iquitos Rotary Club, which is made up of a medical doctor, a nurse, a social worker, bankers and other volunteers, is unusual in that it is one of the only all-female Rotary Clubs in existence.

After getting permission from each village mayor, the group traveled the Amazon River and treated all of the villagers they could reach. They were unable to distribute all of the medication during their initial trip, but the Iquitos Rotary Club agreed to continue the project. The McCulloughs said they hope to return to Iquitos in a couple of years and check up on the project.
The Iquitos Rotary Club will get continued support from McCullough and the District 5910 Rotary Club, including donations to help defray transportation costs. “The only way to get to these villages along the Amazon River is by renting a boat and paying for gas, and we are going to provide funds so they can continue to do that,” McCullough said.

While in Peru, the team also distributed suitcases of shirts and baseball caps to the villagers. “The kids were wearing clean clothes, but they were threadbare,” ElaRuth McCullough said. “They have one set of clothes being washed and are wearing another. I went to Goodwill and some women’s shelters and picked up as many shirts as I could. Seeing the excited look on their faces when we handed them out was well worth the cost.

“We first of all need to be thankful we live in the United States, where we have a good standard of living and healthy living conditions, but I think it’s important we realize we have a responsibility to care for those in the world who are not as fortunate as we are. This project is probably the most rewarding thing we’ve done in our lives. It touched our hearts and it would have never taken place had it not been for the trip to the Amazon River with the Traveling Aggies.”

He summed up his feelings about the project by offering a quote from Benjamin Franklin: “You make a living out of what you get, but you make a life out of what you give.”

Dr. McCullough said he was touched by how committed the volunteers and members of the Iquitos Rotary Club were to the cause.

“I asked one of the pathologists with our group if she had ever considered moving to the United States, where she could probably make 10 times the amount of money,” he said. “She told me that she would not move and had dedicated her life to helping the poor and sick people of Peru. That’s a testament to the commitment of the Rotary Club.”

“We don’t want to just help stop the problems they have now, but help keep the problems from coming back.”

– Dr. Jack McCullough