

This *Active Life*

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Members*

Going Global

Retirees like Rosalie Giffoniello discover a new purpose: helping kids and educators in other nations.

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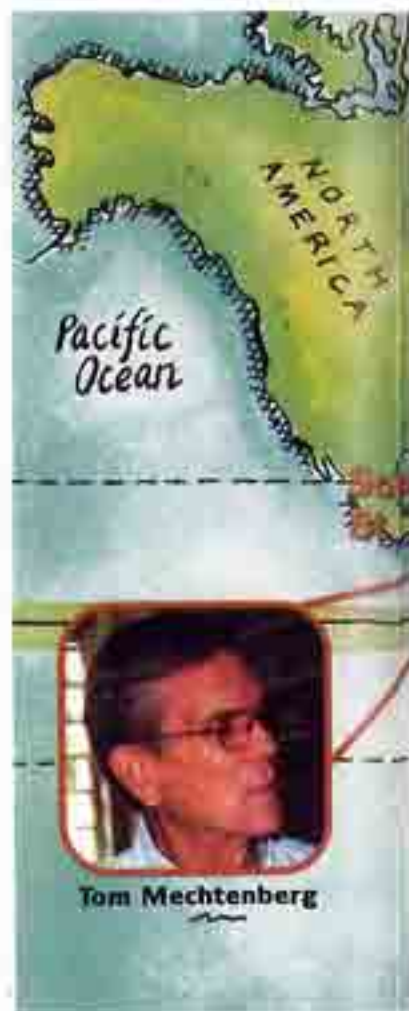
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Going Global

By John O'Neil

It was the baby boomers—fresh from college and full of idealism—that John F. Kennedy called to service when he launched the Peace Corps in 1961. Four decades later, boomers looking to reinvent retirement are once again trekking across the globe to make a difference in the lives of the less-privileged. *This Active Life* talked to NEA-Retired members serving children and their fellow educators in far-flung spots around the world: India, Thailand, Tanzania, and St. Lucia. A snapshot of what they're doing—and what they've learned.



Tom Mechtenberg

Kolkata, India



When New Jersey member **Rosalie Giffoniello** arrived in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) in 1999 to work with Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity for eight weeks, the conditions facing orphaned children with

disabilities shocked the former speech therapist.

"The kids were lying on the floor on mats or in cribs all day long," she says. "No stimulation. The kids had potential, but no one recognized it." During her service, Giffoniello taught some of the children to feed themselves or walk for the first time. And she decided to make a personal, life-altering commitment to the children of Kolkata's slums. "When I went home, I took early retirement from my job, gave away my possessions, and returned to Kolkata for good," she recalls.

Since then, Giffoniello, with friend Janet Grosshandler-Smith, has launched the non-

profit Empower the Children (ETC) that sponsors six small but vital programs to aid the destitute and disabled in Kolkata.

The "pavement school," for example, serves about 30 homeless children ages 4–16 who live on the streets, begging to survive. Until recently, the lessons took place right on the streets, but Giffoniello found space on the roof of a building. The children get lessons, lunch, and regular access to a mobile clinic. "We try to slowly reorient the children from the street to the classroom," Giffoniello explains. "You have to be patient, because the kids need a lot of attention. But, slowly, they begin to change their perception of themselves from beggars to students."



Photo: Bob O'Neil

Giffoniello herself teaches children ages 3–5 in an innovative preschool class designed to stimulate children's creativity. The program uses curriculum materials developed by friends of ETC in New Jersey. Another ETC program provides two hours of tutoring in a coaching center for 15 girls from some of the poorest slums of Kolkata. Giffoniello teaches each Saturday at yet another program, a



home for 50 young adults with mental and physical disabilities. On the drawing board: a new orphanage that will serve 30 boys. In the midst of some of the most impoverished conditions in the world, "We're trying to give them their childhoods back," Giffoniello sums up.

Rosalie now lives in Kolkata nearly year-round, returning to the United States primarily to see her family and friends; to speak about ETC's work to schools, colleges, and community groups; and to raise money to support ETC's work. Her message: "If you're more caring for others, you're bringing the world one step closer to peace."

And she says she welcomes volunteers to India to help out. Last year, she worked with 16 volunteers from the United States, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom. Several of them were making their second or third visit to serve the children of Kolkata. "This is a perfect opportunity for a retired teacher," she says. "Our volunteers say this is a life-changing experience. They go to sleep each night feeling very gratified that they're making a difference."

For more information, contact Empower the Children, 7 Ryans Way, Jackson, NJ 08527 or e-mail Rosalie at giffoniello@hotmail.com.

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Arusha, Tanzania

In this desperately poor African nation, where teachers often lack books and 100 primary-grade children may cram into a single classroom, Nebraska member **Mary Jo Huelle** works to keep alight a small beacon of hope.

The Mwangaza Teachers' Center (*mwangaza* is Swahili for "enlightenment"), which Huelle and her colleagues helped to build in 1997, represents a step forward for Tanzanian teachers, who must cope with shortages of materials and few avenues to improve their skills. Huelle first went to Tanzania in 1996 as part of a teacher exchange project run by the Lutheran church. She returned in 1997 and again for six weeks this past summer to help construct two new additions to the center: a seminar room and a hostel wing that will provide lodging for teachers who travel from other parts of the country for training.

It's the latest accomplishment of the Mwangaza Education for Partnership project, which operates teacher exchanges