

UP FRONT

H2Optimist

VAL JOHNSON

*Rotary Club of New Brighton/
Mounds View, Minn., USA*

During a presentation at a recent club meeting, Val Johnson saw one Rotarian nudge his neighbor and whisper, "We've been outdone by a bunch of eighth graders." Johnson chuckles as she recounts the story because those students were talking about a nonprofit she'd cofounded in 2007. H2O for Life matches schools in the United States with schools in developing nations that lack clean water and sanitation facilities; the students from Highview Middle School in New Brighton had raised \$13,000 to build a dam in Kenya. The nonprofit provides resources for teachers and helps students hold fundraisers such as water walks, which simulate the chore of fetching water – sometimes from miles away – that many children around the world perform every day. So far, students have raised more than \$1 million for projects at schools in 26 countries. In May, H2O for Life launched a pilot project with the Water and Sanitation Rotarian Action Group, Procter & Gamble, and Africare. "We went into this thinking we were doing great things for people in developing nations," says Johnson. "What we saw was how it was developing and changing our U.S. students – that middle school kids could say, 'I made a difference and saved a life.' They will grow up to be great philanthropists and great Rotarians." – SUSIE MA

