

This Great American Went From Dropping Out In Seventh Grade To Helping End Polio Across The World

James Steele rose from a middle-school dropout from the 'hood' to the president of his local Rotary Club. Now, he's helping take down polio once and for all.



By [Christine Weerts](#)

OCTOBER 23, 2020

No one is more surprised than James Steele that he is president of the Rotary Club in his hometown of Selma, Alabama. Most Rotarian presidents aren't seventh-grade dropouts from the "hood" who left home at 16 to work a string of dead-end jobs.

Steele — now a successful businessman — wasn't even going to attend a Rotary meeting, thinking it was a bunch of old guys "sitting around talking about whatever they were talking about." At a friend's repeated invitations, he finally attended a meeting and was surprised to find a vibrant and diverse group of people of all ages. Their focus? Helping Selma become a better community through

club projects and their own jobs. “They are people of action, doing good and that’s what I wanted to be part of,” said Steele, 51

Now in his second year as president, Steele is preparing Selma Rotarians to celebrate World Polio Day on Oct. 24, a signature cause of Rotary International and one Steele values most. The day was selected to commemorate the birth of Jonas Salk, who in 1955 developed the first vaccine against poliomyelitis.

As a child, James received a Salk vaccine and didn’t grow up with a fear of the paralyzing disease. But the Rotarian stories he has heard from victims have tugged at his heart. “Once I got to know the cause, it pulled me in,” he said. Selma Rotarians are joining a **national effort** with Dunkin Donuts’s “Purple Pinky” donuts, Steele said. The club has purchased dozens of boxes of donuts designed to look like pinky fingers with the fingernail painted purple; the \$20 cost of each box goes to Rotary’s fight against polio. The donuts reflect world vaccination efforts: when children are given the oral vaccine, their pinky fingernails are painted purple, so medical staff knows who has received the vaccine.

This World Polio Day, Rotarians have great news to celebrate. In August, the World Health Organization announced that the wild poliovirus has been **eradicated** from all 47 countries in Africa, a 24-year “herculean effort by the international community and health care workers” who had to traverse rough remote terrain and hostile tribes. Rotary International was **instrumental** in the

beginning that work, partnering with South African President Nelson Mandela in 1996 to launch Kick Polio Out of Africa Campaign.

Beginning in 1979, Rotary has **led a worldwide polio vaccination campaign**, when it vaccinated 6 million children in the Philippines. Rotary members have contributed more than \$2.1 billion and countless volunteer hours to help vaccinate nearly 3 billion children in 122 countries.

Today, polio is endemic in only two countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan. While celebrating their progress stamping out polio, Steele says Selma Rotarians are still working hard to make sure the effort keeps going. “We want to see all the children of the world vaccinated against polio,” he said.

There are more than 35,000 Rotary Clubs worldwide with 1.2 million members, who serve locally and internationally. It was founded by Chicago attorney Paul Harris in 1905 to bring business owners together for humanitarian efforts.

The Selma Rotary Club was chartered just 12 years later and has a long history of volunteering in the community, serving lunch to veterans, filling food bags at the Food Bank, giving scholarships to college-bound students, installing park benches for the city, giving books and supplies to schools, sponsoring lunches for first responders, teachers, and medical workers, supporting the 2020 Census, and of course, fundraising for Rotary International’s worldwide campaign to end polio.

Steeles's love for Selma is rooted in growing up in his grandmother's house "in the hood," which he is renovating. He dropped out of school in seventh-grade and left home. When he returned, his first Selma jobs were washing dishes at a local elementary school during the day and mopping floors at a discount store at night. He later worked in fast food but was fired when they learned he didn't have a high school diploma.

Despite setbacks like that, Steele kept going, often working two jobs to support his family. In his 30s, he decided to go back to school. He got his GED and despite being older than most of his classmates, began business studies at the local community college. Now he's just one math class away from graduating from the University of Alabama with a bachelor's degree in human environmental sciences and hotel restaurant management. "I finally figured out that education was the key to moving forward," he said.

As manager of one of the most successful Domino's locations in the area, excellent sales prompted the company to build a stand-alone dine-in facility four years ago, although it is closed during COVID. Steele hopes his story will inspire a younger generation, especially his employees. "I want them to be able to say, 'If Mr. James can do it, so can I.'"

Domino's Pizza was deemed an essential service in Selma and has remained open through the pandemic. Steele has worked hard to keep his staff employed while also following all government safety logistics and protocols — "to do everything necessary to keep the invisible enemy at bay."