



## RI PRESIDENT'S CLOSING REMARKS

John F. Germ  
14 June 2017

My friends, my fellow Rotarians, and guests,

I know it seems like we only just got here, but soon, it will be time to go. This convention that we've looked forward to, and planned for, for so many months is nearly at its end. We'll say goodbye for another year to friends old and new, and to Atlanta, where we have lived together for these few days in the world of Rotary.

It's been an amazing week. It's been a joy to spend this time here in Atlanta with so many of you. And it's been a tremendous privilege to have served as your president, leading a Rotary that is stronger than ever before — with a membership that is growing, talented, diverse, and engaged; with partnerships that enable us to achieve even more and set our sights even higher; with clubs that are willing to do what it takes to achieve the most that they can — without ever letting go of what makes us who we are.

Together, we've brought health, hope, and a better life to communities all over the world. Together, that's just what we'll keep on doing, year after year after year.

And together, we are going to do something else, something with an impact that will outlast every single one of us here in this room today. Together, we will leave a polio-free world to all of our children.

We've heard a lot about polio this week — about why it's so incredibly important that we see this through to the end. You've heard the stories, you know the numbers, you understand the science, and you recognize what the end of polio will mean for Rotary. This evening, I want to share with you what it will mean to me.

Some of you here are from countries where polio is a very recent memory. Many of you have seen it firsthand. And some of you grew up, as I grew up, in a world where polio was feared as much as war. Where polio was a thief that came in the night, robbing parents of their children, children of their future. And you remember the incredible outpouring of relief and joy when a vaccine was found — when the mothers and fathers of the world finally had a way to protect their children.

I was vaccinated back then, just as all American children were in the 1950s, with a little pink sugar cube carrying two drops of vaccine. But in those days, they only vaccinated the children. They didn't vaccinate the adults, because most adults had long since been exposed to the poliovirus and were immune.

Most of them — but not all of them.

And that's why, in the summer of 1958, my brother walked in the back door of our house in Chattanooga by himself. He and my father had gone down to the Tennessee River that day to go fishing, but George came back alone. He stood there just inside the screen door, and he said to me, "Daddy can't walk. Something's happened." That something was polio.

We both went back down to the river, and to this day I couldn't tell you how the two of us got him home. I just don't remember. But I do remember the doctor saying he had polio, using the word "crippled," saying he wouldn't be able to walk with that leg ever again, and my father saying back to him how that wasn't going to happen. I remember he had my mother tie an iron, one of those old-fashioned cast-iron pressing irons, to his ankle with a cord, so that the weight of the iron would never quite touch the floor. And he would lie in his bed all day, moving his leg against that weight a little bit, just as much as he was able, to try to get back his strength into those muscles.

My father was a rock mason with an eighth-grade education and a family to provide for. And eventually, his will won out over polio. He always had a limp, but he did walk again, and he worked again, just as he said he would.

He was a strong-willed man, a stubborn man. So I guess I came by it honestly. And I feel about polio just the same way he felt 59 years ago.

Polio isn't going to win. That's just not going to happen, because we aren't going to let it. We've got too much to do to let polio stand in the way. We need to *End Polio Now* — and make history forever.

Because there is so much for us to do in Rotary. And when polio is finally gone, we'll be able to do so much more. We'll be able to redirect all of that effort, all of those resources, toward other needs that are so great. And we'll have earned even greater recognition and trust and confidence from the communities we serve, enabling us to serve them even better in the years ahead.

Sometime soon, we're going to reach a milestone that the whole world will notice: one year without a single case of polio caused by the wild poliovirus. It will be one of the most significant global milestones we will pass on the road to a polio-free world. And when we do pass that milestone, we'll have a chance in Rotary that we can't afford to waste: a chance to leverage that attention, and that success, into more success to come.

It's our responsibility to be ready for that moment with flexible, active, and welcoming clubs that are the natural destination for anyone looking to make a difference, whether they've recently retired or are still building their careers.

We've all been working hard to make sure that whenever someone talks about polio, they also talk about Rotary. Because the more Rotary is recognized for our good work — the more our public image reflects what we've achieved — the more we'll be recognized as a valuable partner, the stronger the partners we'll be able to attract, and the more we'll be able to achieve down the line.

I am proud that Rotary is stronger today than it was a year ago. I'm confident that under the leadership of President-elect Ian, it will be even stronger a year from now. And I know, just as you do, exactly how we'll get there: by working creatively and efficiently; by leveraging all of our tools and all of our resources; by serving humanity together, and making a difference, through Rotary.

I hope that this week, you've found new inspiration and new ideas for your service in the year to come. And I hope that this convention has reminded you, as this year has reminded me, of what an incredible organization Rotary is and how important every single Rotarian is to the work that we do.

I want to end today by telling you a story I told this year's district governors at our International Assembly a year-and-a-half ago. It's a story about Albert Einstein — long before he became a brilliant physicist and a household name.

The young Albert grew up, for most of his childhood, in an educated household in Munich, in what was then the German Empire. His father was an engineer, and his mother was a talented pianist who wanted to be sure her son grew up with a love of music. So, at the age of six, the young Albert acquired a quarter-sized violin and went off to his first violin lesson.

The next seven years might sound familiar to any of you who ever tried to send a child to music lessons who didn't want to go. He hated it. He wouldn't practice. Sometimes, when he was supposed to be playing his violin, his mother would hear things go quiet; she'd open the door to see what he was up to and find him building houses out of playing cards! But she wouldn't let him quit, and things went on that way — Albert complaining, and his mother insisting — for years.

Until one day, when Albert was 13, someone finally thought to take him to a concert. And for the first time, he heard the violin concertos of Mozart.

He described the moment later as one that changed him completely. For the first time, he understood not just how a violin is supposed to *sound* — but how it's supposed to be heard. He heard the violin sing, not alone, but as part of an orchestra — with all of those different instruments singing their own tunes in glorious harmony. He went home, picked his violin back up, and was never the same again.

Many years later, his wife said that she had first fallen in love with him because of how beautifully he played Mozart. And toward the end of his life, when people tried to talk to him about his many achievements in physics, all of his honors and awards, he would talk instead about the joy that he had found — not in science, but in music. He would say, "I could not imagine my life without my violin."

I think many of us would say the same about Rotary.

All of us have had our moments in Rotary: moments when we got that chance to listen and to hear the music that we could only make in harmony with others. Moments when we realized that our song in life is more beautiful when we sing it together. My friends, I hope that for you, this week has been filled with such moments — and such music.

We've all listened to plenty of people talk over the years about what Rotary is, what Rotary means, and what it means to be a Rotarian. There are as many ideas about that as there are Rotarians — maybe even a few more. But as for me, I'll always tell you that being a Rotarian means just one thing, one very simple thing: It means that when someone needs help and you can give that help, you don't walk away; you don't turn your back. You say: I'm here for you. I'll do whatever I can. And I know that whatever I do, I'm not doing it alone — I'm doing it with *Rotary Serving Humanity*.

I'm doing it — with all of you.