



RI PRESIDENT'S WELCOME ADDRESS

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My friends and fellow Rotarians, spouses, honored guests, and family of Rotary, welcome to this 108th Rotary International Convention, in this great city of Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

It is a great joy to see so many of you here today, celebrating another wonderful year of Rotary service and the 100th anniversary of The Rotary Foundation that has made so much of that service possible.

We've got an amazing week planned for you, with inspiring speakers, great entertainment, and so many breakout sessions and events that the hardest part of your week might just be figuring out what to do next.

And I hope that as busy as all of you are going to be, you still make time for what might just be the most important part of every convention: meeting new people and getting to know your fellow Rotarians. Everyone you meet here this week, no matter how different they look, no matter where they're from and what language they speak — everyone here is a part of your Rotary family. So don't be shy. You might just find yourself a new friend, or your club a new partner. It all starts with a smile and a hello — from one Rotarian to another.

And if there's one thing I've learned this year, it's that when two Rotarians get together and start talking about service — there's just no telling where that might lead.

It has been a privilege, and a tremendous honor, to have served as your president in this Rotary year, to have seen just what can happen when dedicated individuals come together, in Rotary, to serve humanity.

I wish there were a way for every Rotarian, in every Rotary club, to see the things that I have seen this year: the work that is being done, by men and women just like yourselves, all over the world. The incredible diversity of our clubs, of our communities, and of our service — of the challenges faced by so much of the world, and the ways that Rotary is working to overcome them.

Growing up in Chattanooga, Tennessee, my family wasn't wealthy. But in a country like

the United States, there were certain things I always took for granted. I never lived in a place where you couldn't just turn a tap and get clean water. I never lived in a place where being poor meant you couldn't go to school. When Judy and I had our own kids, we always knew where to go if they got sick; we could drive over to the doctor, and we knew that if we ever needed an ambulance to go to the hospital, all we had to do was pick up the phone.

Becoming a Rotarian was what opened my eyes to the reality in so much of the rest of the world. Where clean water might be miles away, or not available at all. Where no sanitation means a girl can't go to school. Where there is no ambulance to call, and no hospital to go to. Places where the work of Rotary is changing lives.

Like in Jamaica, a country of 2.8 million people, where until last year, there was not a single medical facility able to perform modern laser eye surgery. If you needed that surgery for something as common as cataracts, you had to travel abroad. And in a country where a minimum-wage worker earns \$50 a week, many people didn't have that option. But last July, thanks to Rotarians, a new laser eye surgery machine came to Montego Bay and was installed in a public hospital, where you can be treated whether or not you're able to pay.

Looking at that machine, I thought of my wife Judy, and how her cataract surgery changed her life. I thought about all of the men and women in Jamaica who were still living with poor vision because they hadn't been able to afford that surgery. And I was so proud of the Rotarians who decided to change their lives, through *Rotary Serving Humanity*.

A few months after that, Judy and I went down to Guatemala, to a village so remote that the nearest clinic with any kind of equipment was eight hours away, over mountain roads so steep and hazardous you could only go by truck. Thanks to Rotarians in Guatemala and Illinois, and a grant from our Foundation, that village had just gotten an X-ray machine and a computer set up for telemedicine. The people there were so excited they blocked off the whole street for the celebration. Because until they got that machine, if you fell down and broke a bone, if you needed an X-ray, the doctor couldn't do a thing for you but write "needs X-ray" on a piece of paper, pin it to your shirt, and put you in the back of a truck.

And looking at that X-ray machine, surrounded by so many happy people, I couldn't stop thinking about our daughter, Sharon, when she was nine years old — when her brothers were playing football, ran right into her, and broke her arm.

I thought about how different that experience would have been if our Sharon had been a little girl in that village. If instead of driving her a few miles to a hospital for an X-ray and a cast, we'd had to carry her to the village doctor, who'd put her in the back of a truck, to ride eight hours over rutted roads with a broken arm. Thinking of that, I

understood the joy those people felt — how their lives had been changed, through *Rotary Serving Humanity*.

In Uganda, I saw a blood bank built by Rotarians. And there in Kampala, I met the past district governor who got that project started. I heard the story of how, when he was just a little kid, his 15-year-old sister gave birth to a child, out behind their house. There was no hospital or anywhere else to go. And without a hospital, or anywhere else to go, there was nothing his family could do when she started to hemorrhage. Nothing they could do but watch, as she bled to death — when a simple transfusion might have saved her.

The child born that day is grown now, with children of her own. And thanks to Rotary, her mother's death wasn't in vain. Because today, the little brother who couldn't do anything to help back then is a Rotarian.

Today, because of Rotary, Kampala has a clean and modern blood bank, where people can go to give blood, and where hospitals can get blood for the patients who need it. Uganda is a safer and healthier place than it was before — because of Rotarians who saw a need. Because of *Rotary Serving Humanity*.

Every one of us here today, no matter who we are or where we're from, has the ability to change lives. Every one of us has that potential — to reach out to those places where there is so much need and do what it takes to make things better.

It all starts with you. It all starts when Rotarians get together and see a need and say to each other, "Let's see if there isn't something we can do to help."

Because that's why we're here. That's what we're all about in Rotary — serving humanity.