

**President's Keynote Address to 2008 RI Convention**  
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Welcome to the 99th Rotary International Convention! It is an incredible joy for me to greet you all here in Los Angeles and to share with you this most wonderful of Rotary events. All over the world, all throughout this year, I have seen how *Rotary Shares*. I've seen that *Rotary Shares* in every amazing way you could imagine, and then some. Every day, in every one of our nearly 33,000 clubs, *Rotary Shares* — with passion, with caring, and with pride. But at a convention, we don't just share Rotary, we celebrate it! A convention is a time to shout our love for Rotary, and our pride in Rotary, and our joy in everything that we've accomplished in our Rotary year together.

Last year, in Salt Lake City, I asked my fellow Rotarians to join me in committing to make 2008-09 the year that we would all say yes to Rotary. That we would say, Yes, I will lead that project. Yes, I will help you with yours. Yes, I will bring in that new member. And yes, I will be committed to my Rotary work, whatever that work may be. I asked you, and you answered me. You said, yes, yes, yes! Here we all are, a year later, and now I'd like to ask you again: In this Rotary year, did you love Rotary? Did you serve Rotary? And did you share Rotary? Thank you!

For me, this convention is an incredible end to an incredible year, a year in which I saw how *Rotary Shares* in more ways than I ever dreamed possible. It's a year that got off to a great start because I started with some great help from Past RI President Bill Boyd; from my RI directors, district governors, and club presidents; and from our dedicated staff in Evanston.

One of the first questions I had from the staff when I was nominated was what I wanted as my RI theme. I was all ready with my answer. I said my theme would be *Rotary Shares*. Because to me, these words captured all that was good about Rotary and Rotarians. Because to me, Rotary is about sharing. It's about sharing our time, every week in our meetings with our fellow members and with our communities and with people throughout the world. It's about sharing our expertise, our talents, and our resources in countless ways. It's about sharing what we have, with our fellow Rotarians and with those in need. That's what I told my district governors, when we began this Rotary year. But now I know better. Yes, *Rotary Shares* means all that, but it means so much more. It means every one of you and every single Rotarian in every Rotary country working together. Working with dedication and working with love, working for a better, safer, healthier, and more peaceful world.

In the past two years, Joan and I have met thousands of Rotarians in dozens of countries, and we've seen their remarkable work firsthand. Every single day, we saw projects that awed and inspired us. I'm glad to report that in true Rotary spirit, some of the clubs we visited even put us to work. In Halifax, I helped get breakfast ready for some hungry schoolchildren, and I read to some third graders in Connecticut. In Chennai, India, I joined hundreds of Rotarians, Rotaractors, and community members who came together to discuss an ambitious microcredit program that will help thousands of people climb out of poverty.

I also saw the tremendous job Rotary has done in helping communities recover from the tsunami that devastated so much of Southeast Asia in 2004. It's been three and a half years since that terrible catastrophe. You don't see it in the news anymore. But Rotarians haven't forgotten, because they've been busy rebuilding. In Sri Lanka, I had the honor of presiding at the ceremonial closing of the Schools Re-awakening project. This project highlighted what's best about Rotary. The Rotarians in Sri Lanka didn't just send short-term aid and then move on to the next project. They took the time and the care to determine just how they could help best. They decided that they would rebuild schools, 25 of them, one in each province. The government allocated them 25 schools, and the Rotarians went to work.

But they didn't just rebuild the schools the way they were. As one Rotarian said, what would have been the point of that? Instead, they made bigger and better schools — model schools, with science labs, gymnasiums, computer rooms, and spacious classrooms. Each one has modern sanitation and a permanent source of water. And in areas without electricity, the schools are powered by solar energy. The Sri Lankan Rotarians didn't just return life to normal for these students. They made it better than ever. And that's a hallmark of Rotary service worldwide and one reason why long-term disaster recovery is an area in which we excel. We can't seem to leave "good enough" alone. We always want to make it better.

And we do. In Central America, people who lost everything to Hurricane Mitch in 1998 have built thriving businesses, thanks to a Rotary-developed microcredit program. Now, they're enjoying a better life than they had before disaster hit.

In October, wildfires swept through Southern California. They left more than half a million people homeless. Rotarians were among the first to help, working side by side with fire victims to clear out debris and sift through the rubble to salvage whatever was left. Former Rotarian Mike Miller was among those who lost everything in the fires. Mike had been a Rotarian for 12 years but had left his club shortly before the fires hit. When his house burned, he received so many offers of help from Rotarians that he realized he'd made a mistake. "So I rejoined," he said. "And I'll never drop out. Never. I'll be a Rotarian forever." Now, that's one way to make a dedicated Rotarian — of course, it's not the way we *want* to make them. So, how do we do it? What does it take to show people the kind of organization Rotary is, the kind of organization they want to be a part of, now and forever?

This is one of the issues we discussed at seven membership conferences held throughout the United States and Canada this year. I chose sites in North America because, unfortunately, this region has experienced an alarming decline in membership in recent years. Between 200 and 600 Rotarians attended each conference. And these conferences were great. There was a real energy, and a real sense of shared understanding of just why membership is such an urgent issue. We talked about the challenges that Rotary membership is facing and will continue to face, as the world's population and the need for Rotary service continue to grow. And we talked about how the situation of only a few people bringing in most of the members just can't continue.

Some of you may have heard me talk about the idea of “member get member,” that it must be the responsibility of every Rotarian to bring one new member into their clubs, every single year. It is, very simply, the way we need to approach the whole question of membership for Rotary to survive and grow. Because membership has to be seen as a matter of individual, universal responsibility. It’s not everyone’s responsibility; it’s the responsibility of each of us. It’s mine and yours and yours and yours. Every one of us, individually, has that responsibility to our organization, that responsibility to see that it will survive.

As an accountant, I tend to think in terms of a cost-benefit analysis. So I ask what’s the potential cost to me of inviting someone I think is qualified for membership, and might be interested in becoming a member, to a meeting of my club? Well, the cost might be a little bit of time. I’ll have to approach that person and talk to him or her about Rotary and find a time to bring that person to a meeting. There’s also the potential cost of a bit of embarrassment to me if the person says no, or if they turn out not to be qualified. Those are the costs that I weigh when I’m making that decision.

But those are the costs that I weigh against the potential *benefit*. And what is that potential benefit? The benefit is one new Rotarian. The benefit is one more pair of hands to do Rotary’s work. One more person to strengthen our club and our service, to be inspired by our core values, to help bring help and hope where it is needed. I think we can see how this works out on a balance sheet: There’s little to lose and so very much to gain.

Over the past two years, I’ve met many dignitaries and world leaders. Invariably, they have commended Rotary and Rotarians for their service to humanity. I’ve accepted these compliments and I even accepted a few awards. But I’ve accepted them on behalf of you. Because it is you — all of you, the Rotarians of the world — who have earned these accolades through your relentless efforts to make this world a better place. And I’m not the only one who thinks that. When I presented the Rotary Award of Honor to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon during his visit to Chicago this year, he said that really the UN should be giving Rotary an award for all of our work on polio eradication and our efforts to achieve the UN’s Millennium Development Goals.

One of our greatest honors this year didn’t come with a medal or a plaque. It came from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which gave Rotary a US\$100 million challenge grant to be used for polio eradication. What I think is so significant about this grant is what it says about Rotary — that the Gates Foundation gave the money to Rotary International before we had raised even one penny of matching funds. That’s right. They just initiated a bank transfer. For \$100 million. Now, I’m an accountant and I’ve seen a lot of money change hands, but I’ve never seen \$100 million just turn up in my bank account. I don’t think most people have! But that’s just what the Gates Foundation did for Rotary. They gave us that money, and they told us to spend it all by 31 December 2008, two full years before the date we had agreed to finish raising the matching funds.

All the distinguished leaders that I met offered great praise and thanks for Rotary’s work, but I was especially struck by the words of Ólafur Grímsson, the president of Iceland, who said, if I may paraphrase: “Rotary has the right answer. Your organization includes men and

women on an equal basis, and you have members from nearly every country. They represent every race, color, and creed. So what the world must do to make peace possible is have more Rotarians.” I couldn’t have said it better myself. What this world needs is more Rotarians. More Rotarians working hard and working together, working with joy and working with love.

My friends, in this Rotary year, I’ve seen what can happen when *Rotary Shares*. I’ve seen the magic of Rotarians saying yes! That yes — *your* yes — lifted me up, and it filled my heart with joy. Your yes is changing the world. And for that, I thank you all.