

RI President's Keynote Address

John Kenny, 2009-10 RI President

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One year ago, in Birmingham, I thanked Rotarians for the honor they had bestowed upon me as the first Rotarian from Scotland to serve as RI president. Today, here in Montréal, I thank you again — for the honor of serving and for the honor of representing you.

I have always believed that the real work of Rotary, the work I have seen in this past year, was not done by me or by any member of the Board of Directors of Rotary International. It was done by you — in every one of your districts, in every one of your clubs, and in every one of your communities.

Throughout this past year, I saw project after project that made me proud to be a Rotarian — projects that took the knowledge, the skills, and the resources of each club and district and brought them together where they were most needed.

In Rotary, we serve because we know that we can and we believe that we should.

In Rotary, we know what we are capable of, and we feel it is our responsibility to live up to our potential. And we know that, as the American essayist John Burroughs wrote: “For anything worth having one must pay the price; and the price is always work, patience, love, self-sacrifice — no paper currency, no promises to pay, but the gold of real service.”

I am glad to know that the gold of service is shining brightly today, in every one of the more than 200 countries and geographical areas where Rotary serves.

Traveling directly from Rotary headquarters in Evanston to some of the most impoverished corners of the earth impressed upon me the importance of what we do, in a way that words cannot express. It is one thing to hear and read about the devastation that the January earthquake caused in Haiti. It was another thing entirely to go there — to see the collapsed buildings, walk through the rubble, try to comprehend how many people had been lost, and realize the scope of what would be needed to even begin to rebuild.

To see a Rotary wheel in the midst of that terrible place was a wonderful thing.

I went to Haiti on a simple mission: to find out what their needs were, and how Rotary could best meet them. The people I spoke to explained that rather than goods, which could be produced more cheaply locally, or temporary shelters, which were in danger of becoming permanent, what was needed for the long term was help for those who were injured and ill, and assistance in rebuilding permanent structures — schools, clinics, institutions, and homes. They wanted to build with local labor, providing jobs and help to the local economy. What they needed was help getting started — the kind of help that Rotary can provide.

In Banda Aceh, Indonesia, the area worst hit by the 2004 South Asia tsunami, I attended the inauguration of a health center built by Rotarians — a project that stands along with dozens of other Rotary projects that have helped in the long-term recovery of the region. Rotarians were in Banda Aceh before the news crews came and stayed long after the other aid groups left. We are there and helping yet. It was moving to see rows and rows of graves of those

who had perished, at least 250,000 — but no one knows the exact figure — and to see a large freighter beached in a field, almost two miles from the sea, driven there by the force of the tsunami, and a fishing boat perched on the roof of a house.

We know that our service touches others in our own communities, and in communities we may never see. But it is easy to forget just how much of a difference simple acts of service can make. A small loan to start a business, a day spent making repairs to a home, the gift of a pair of eyeglasses or a bicycle — all of these things have the potential to completely change another person's life.

In Hungary a few months ago, June and I met a little girl called Boroga, who the day before had had heart surgery from the Gift of Life project. To the Rotarians involved, locally and abroad, the Gift of Life is a wonderful project, one that, in its ability to gather resources and knowledge and bring them where they are needed, demonstrates the best of Rotary. To us, Boroga's surgery represented a Rotary success. To Boroga's mother, the surgery meant something very different, something unbearably precious: Those Rotarians had given her back her little girl. They had given her, very literally, the gift of her daughter's life.

How can one compare what those Rotarians gave away to what she received from them? Some time, some money, some cooperation and effort — no great sacrifice from anyone. What was the result? A little girl's life saved, and a mother who will always remember Rotarians as the people who gave her that miracle.

All around the world, Rotary is serving others. I have seen the work of your hands. In Brazil, the work of District 1110 with the cooperation of the local government, local Rotarians, and a Rotary Foundation grant, will help make the water of the River Gravatai drinkable and bring safe water to one million people who now lack it.

In March, June and I visited Latvia, a country which had not been visited by a Rotary International president since the visit of Paul Harris in 1933. It was so encouraging to see the enthusiasm and the dedication of the Rotarians as they provided assistance to their communities and their desire to help provide a better life for their children, especially in the rural areas. I found this true of all of the emerging democracies in Central Europe where membership is growing.

In Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, I saw Rotarians meet the needs in their own neighborhood by giving thousands of dictionaries to local children. More important than the dictionaries is the connection they give those children to Rotary — a sense that there are people in the community who are looking out for them and who care.

In August, June and I traveled to China, as I wanted to see firsthand how Rotary was developing there and how it could develop further. We visited the Sun Children's Village project, an orphanage supported by the Rotary Club of Beijing. Two babies, two months old, were brought to us. They had been named Dragonfly and Strawberry. We inquired how they had come to the orphanage and were told that these infants had been found alone in an empty train. Of course, both were girls.

As I held one of them, strange as I must have been to her, this tiny child was calm and happy in my arms, clinging to me with her little hands. A child, who wanted nothing I could not give her. She wanted only what every child everywhere wants — to feel safe, cared for, and loved.

It is hard to express in words how that experience, for me, encompassed what I feel about Rotary. There is so much we can do, so much we can give that takes so little from us but means so much to others. And as important as it is to give material assistance — to help in the areas of water, health and hunger, and literacy — it is equally vital that we give that help freely, with true caring for others. Because often, simply caring is what helps others most of all.

In Rotary, we understand that, as Moliere said, “a man’s true wealth . . . is the good that he does in this world to his fellows.”

Each of us is here today because we value Rotary and our membership in it. We believe that Rotary is needed and that a community with a Rotary club is better off than one without. This is why we are committed to seeing Rotary continue to extend. As you saw from the flag ceremony, we have expanded Rotary District 2450 with the formation of a new Rotary club in Ramallah, where, along with RI Director Phil Silvers, I attended the charter of a club formed with the cooperation of Israeli and Jordanian Rotarians.

In this troubled world, let us never forget that the sanctity of many transcends the sovereignty of nations.

Let us remember that we are the guardians of Rotary’s heritage. Let us remember that our acts of goodness will be implanted forever in the lives of those we seek to help. Let us never forget that the common vision of peace within a happy world, a world free of fear and want, can be attained through the radiance of Rotary.

What we are is God’s gift to us; what we do with it is our gift to God.

What Rotary is, what it will be, what it can become — all of this depends on the choices we make every day, every hour, and every minute. How we serve, whom we help, how to balance our own abilities with the needs of our communities — these are the decisions that will shape the Rotary to come. These are the decisions that are up to you.

The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands.

Thank you.