



2013-14 PRESIDENT'S KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Ron Burton
Rotary International Convention
Sydney, Australia
1 June 2014

Good afternoon and g'day!

It is a joy to be here in Sydney today and to welcome all of you to this 105th Rotary International Convention!

In this Rotary year, I have asked all of you to do your best to *Engage Rotary, Change Lives*. And now, as the incredible 2013-14 Rotary year comes to an end, we've come together to celebrate all the ways we've done just that and to find the inspiration to do even more.

Here in Sydney, we'll have the chance to share the stories of our good work. And my friends, there are so many stories to tell. Because every second of every day, in just about every corner of the world, something good is being done, someone's life is being changed — in the name of Rotary.

These precious few days together are a time to learn from each other, a time to find out just how much we can accomplish when we put on a Rotary pin — and live with Rotary, not just on our lapels, but in our hearts.

Because when we realize just what we can accomplish — when we make the choice to truly engage Rotary — that is when lives change. And that is exactly what Jetta and I have seen, over and over, in every Rotary community that we've visited this year.

We saw so many projects that are changing lives in so many ways. And we saw, again and again, how all of Rotary's work — from the simplest projects to the most ambitious — has the power to make the world a better place for everyone who lives in it.

It might be as simple as reading books to children in a first-grade class in Decatur, Alabama, USA, or passing out dictionaries to third-grade students in Norman, Oklahoma, or teaching children how to wash their hands in Kampala, Uganda.

And it might be something much more complex, such as administering life-saving medical procedures in Chandigarh, India, or teaching nursing skills in Kampala, Uganda, or equipping and maintaining classrooms in Rosario, Argentina.

For Jetta and me, this entire year has been an opportunity to see our long-held beliefs about Rotary in action. We've always known that whatever we give to others through Rotary is repaid many times over — in the happiness and satisfaction it brings to us, and in the good it does in the lives of others. But there is such a difference between knowing something in your heart and seeing it with your eyes.

With every new project we saw, every innovative and exciting way Rotarians have found to change lives, Jetta and I said to each other, “If only every Rotarian in the world could see this.” And even more, “If only we could bring people who are thinking about Rotary here to see this.”

Because when you see, when you know, when you truly understand what a power we have in Rotary — what we can do through Rotary — it makes you want to do as much as you can. And that’s what I mean, when I talk about engaging Rotary.

And that’s what all of us need to be doing. Engaging Rotary, and doing more to bring new Rotarians into our clubs, so that they can add to our strength.

I doubt that it is any secret to this audience that our membership worldwide has been stagnant for a dozen years, hovering around 1.2 million members. We could come up with a lot of reasons why we haven’t been attracting new members, and why we aren’t keeping the members we’ve worked so hard to bring in to our clubs. But instead of doing that, maybe we should start with looking at our own clubs and asking ourselves, honestly, Would I join this club today? If your answer is no then ask yourself why. And then, What am I going to do about it? Because if we enjoy Rotary and want to see it not just survive, but thrive, then we must address this issue head on.

And we have to start getting serious about the family of Rotary. We invest a lot of money and effort into Youth Exchange, RYLA, Rotaract, and Interact but the question is, are we getting a fair return on our investment? If not, why not? I would submit to you that we fail to adequately capitalize on our investment. It’s our own fault. We need to start treating our New Generations as family and welcome them all into Rotary before we lose them.

The bottom line is that Rotary’s future — its very survival — is up to us. We can either get up out of our chairs and really make something happen, or we can just sit there and become an endangered species and eventually die off. Each one of us has to make that decision. What will your answer be? Do you think Rotary is worthwhile? Do you want Rotary to be around for another hundred years? I for one say, let’s get busy! Let’s do it, not only for ourselves, but for our children, our grandchildren, and all the peoples of the world. Let’s engage Rotary and let’s change lives.

One of the most memorable events of this Rotary year was the New Generations conference we held in Chennai, India. It really was amazing, with so many thousands of young people excited and involved in Rotary service. We had a great program, and one of the best parts was the polio walk we did, down by the beach.

It would have been a great event under any circumstances. But it was so much more special, because we were having that polio walk in a polio-free India.

An India that had become polio free, in large part because of Rotary.

And when we left Chennai on that last evening, when Jetta and I got on the plane and flew out over that vast city, full of so many countless thousands of people, I looked out the window and down at all the lights, and thought: None of those people down there ever need to fear polio again. Not one mother, not one father, not one child.

We did it. We eradicated polio in India. And if we could do that — well, my friends — there isn’t anything we can’t do.

So as we begin this convention together, with a spirit of fellowship and friendship and love of Rotary service, I want you all to remember that the only thing that limits us in Rotary is our own ambition, our own willingness, to *Engage Rotary, Change Lives*.

Thank you.