

## RI President's Keynote Address

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It is an incredible joy for me to be standing here with all of you today in Birmingham, at this 100th annual Rotary International Convention.

For me, this Rotary year has been a year of growth, of discovery, and of learning. It has been a year of new challenges and new experiences. It has been a year of seeing Rotarians stretch themselves to their limits to *Make Dreams Real* — and a year in which I learned to stretch myself to achieve the most I possibly could.

It was also a year in which I spoke more English than I ever thought I would speak in my entire life — and in the process I learned just how patient and understanding Rotarians really are. To all of the Rotaractors and Interactors who are not English speakers, I would like to say five words: Do your English homework now. You might be RI president one day, and you'll be glad you did.

When I look back at the journey of the last two and a half years, I think of the moment I learned of my nomination. My first reaction, of course, was a feeling of great and simple happiness. My second was to realize that I now had the opportunity of a lifetime: to choose Rotary's theme and emphases.

And I knew, in that moment, what my theme would be. I knew I would ask Rotarians to *Make Dreams Real* to work together, through our emphases of water, health and hunger, and literacy, to reduce the rate of child mortality in our world — because having the chance to make a difference in child mortality, on a large and significant scale, has been my dream now for many years since a trip to Africa that changed me forever.

I was not in Africa on Rotary business. But it is always my habit when traveling to seek out a local Rotary club and attend a meeting. There I met a Rotarian who offered to take me on a driving tour of the countryside. I accepted with pleasure, and the two of us agreed to meet, the next morning, in the lobby of my hotel. As we drove out of the capital city the next day, we left behind shiny buildings and office towers, and then shantytowns, until we reached the savanna. Here was the Africa I had hoped to see, with waving fields and distant trees. I talked with my fellow Rotarian, and he told me about his country — about its problems, its government, the terrible poverty both in the shantytowns and here in the countryside. A few minutes later, he turned off the main road, and we stopped in a small village.

There were perhaps a dozen small mud huts with grass roofs. I stepped out of the car and into the African heat, and as I stood there I heard a sound, a small, weak sound coming from one of the huts. The hut had no windows and an entrance with no door. I walked over and looked in and saw a sight that will never leave me: a woman, lying on a mat, with her baby. Both were clearly ill. Both were obviously starving. She was trying to feed her baby, but had no milk. The baby was crying from hunger but was too weak to cry much.

At that moment, in my shock and horror, I wanted to do anything — anything at all — to help that mother and child. I wanted to reach into my pocket, to find them food, to drive them to a hospital, to take care of them both. But then I realized that I was looking in only one hut, in only one village, in only one country, of the many, many poor and developing countries in the world. In that moment, I knew that I could not walk away from that mother and child, or from the tens of thousands of other children who would die that day. That was when I resolved to do everything I could to reduce the rate of child mortality and to *Make Dreams Real*.

When I was nominated, I chose that as Rotary's theme for this year and I asked Rotarians around the world to work to reduce child mortality through projects in water, health and hunger, and literacy — water because waterborne illnesses are directly responsible for the deaths of 4,000 children every day, and indirectly responsible for hundreds more; health and hunger because malnutrition, and so many diseases, are preventable; and literacy because poverty is the root cause of so much suffering.

In this Rotary year I have been humbled again and again by the scale, the ambition, and the effectiveness of projects in these areas. I have visited dozens of countries and seen hundreds of projects and countless ways that Rotarians have found to save lives.

There are so many lives that Rotarians have touched that it would be impossible to tell you about them all. But today I would like to tell you about just one family that was touched by Rotary.

When Maria Gonzalez was born in the Dominican Republic, three years ago, she began her life in a village where there was no clean water. Her family bought bottled water in the market, water that contained amoebas and bacteria and had become stagnant in the sun. Maria often had diarrhea, and became dehydrated. She spent weeks in the hospital. When she came home, her mother learned that another family had been given a biosand filter through a Rotary project. She saw that the children in that family were no longer sick with the illnesses that affected her own family, and she asked for a filter of her own.

Now, Maria's family uses only filtered water for everything — for cooking, for washing, for drinking, and for bathing. Maria is a healthy little girl now, with a baby sister who is one year old. Since her family began using the filter, none of them has been sick. They are happy children, with a real chance at a healthy life.

At the beginning of the last decade, 10.7 million children died every year, most of them in developing countries, and of preventable causes. Malnutrition and the lack of access to sanitation and safe water were behind more than half of these deaths. Today, those numbers have improved. Child mortality is down by 27 percent. There have been improvements in all regions, including the poorest countries. And much of the gain can be attributed to the simplest of interventions: vaccines, nutritional supplements, bed nets, and better hygiene.

I believe with all my heart that Rotary's work over the last decades has played a role in these improvements. And I hope with all my heart that we will continue to do so, in the years and decades ahead.

I am confident that your caring will continue to inspire your good work. I am confident that with your determination and expertise, and with Rotary cooperation, you will continue the kind of service that helped save Maria's life and the lives of so many other children. And I am confident as well that we will eliminate polio in the very near future. Your response to Rotary's US\$200 Million Challenge has been amazing, and public awareness of our work has never been so high. With everything you contribute, with everything you do to help, you are part of making this great Rotary dream of a polio-free world into a reality.

I thank you all, more than I can say, for what you have done to *Make Dreams Real* in this Rotary year. I thank you for your work in water, health and hunger, and literacy. And I thank you for helping to save children, the only way it can be done — one life at a time.