

President Elect Kenny's Theme Speech @ International Assembly



As I look around this room, I see before me the future: the future of Rotary, and the future of 33,000 communities in nearly every corner of the earth. I see the future, and I see the hope for a better world.

Ninety-six years ago, Paul Harris told those at the 1913 Rotary Convention in Buffalo, New York: "It is a far greater undertaking to be a good Rotarian today than it was yesterday; it will be a far greater undertaking tomorrow than it was today." You are the Rotarians and the Rotary leaders of tomorrow. Paul Harris's challenge to the Rotarians of 1913 is now your own.

Every year, the baton of Rotary leadership passes to a new class of Rotary leaders. Paul Harris passed it to his successors, and they have passed it down to us. We have the responsibility to them, and to all Rotarians, to do justice to our offices and the confidence that has been placed in us.

And that is why we are gathered here today in San Diego. You have all seen the banner that proudly proclaims our purpose this week: "Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve."

We are here from all parts of the world to share knowledge and experience. We are here to be part of the tradition of Rotary leadership that has spanned so many generations - to bring new ideas and fresh enthusiasm, to build on the accomplishments of our predecessors, and to leave better districts and stronger clubs to those who will come after us. We are here because we believe the words of the poet Longfellow, who wrote: "We often judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing. Others judge us by what we have done."

When Rotary was founded, 104 years ago, it was founded on a clear idea: that people of good character, intelligence, and morals, joined together, could achieve a great deal more than they could alone. Rotary has never been a universal concept; we are selective in whom we admit, and that is as it should be. Rotarians are and must be people of a certain caliber, people with the capacity to do great deeds, the sense to do them wisely, and the strength of character to do them honestly and well.

I have always thought it important to bear in mind that Rotary is a voluntary organization, composed of people who are all themselves leaders. And so when addressing such an audience I have never thought it fitting to exhort or demand. Every Rotary club is and must be autonomous; the senior leadership of Rotary International exists not to control but to motivate and guide. We are here to serve the Rotarians and the Rotary clubs of the world. As they have placed their confidence in us, so must we place our confidence in them.

As district governors, you are embarking on one of the most exciting and rewarding years of your life. What do your districts expect of you? First and foremost, they expect, and deserve, your leadership. You are the leaders of Rotary in your communities, and as such, you have a great responsibility.

You have a responsibility to the club presidents in your districts, because the club is the most important part of Rotary. Everything we do, everything we achieve, begins in our clubs. Show me a good club president, and I will show you a good club. Your responsibility to your districts begins with them.

You also have a responsibility to remember that just as you have volunteered to take on the office of district governor, so has every Rotarian in every club in your district volunteered to be a Rotarian. And when working with volunteers, you cannot give commands.

So from where does your authority derive? It derives from your personal ability to lead and inspire. It derives from your vision, your ability to listen, your tact, and your powers of communication. You will have the respect of others to the degree that you earn it through your own conduct.

Former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said: "The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible." In Rotary, we know this to be true. And we as Rotarians must raise our voices to proclaim our values, for they are values to live by.

Every one of you is about to become a district governor. But first and foremost, you are all Rotarians. Offices in Rotary come and go with every Rotary year, but Rotarians we remain. As Rotarians, we are all responsible for this great organization. As Sir Isaac Newton said, "If I have seen further [than others], it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." Each one of us is standing on the shoulders of generations of Rotarians past, and it is our responsibility to determine Rotary's future.

That is why, in 2009-10, our theme will be: *The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands*.

Because the future of Rotary will not be shaped at RI headquarters in Evanston - it will be shaped in each and every Rotary club. Because it is for each of us - as Rotarians - to do what is necessary to keep Rotary strong. Because it is our daily actions, and our daily decisions, that determine the course of Rotary for us all.

The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands.

I do not intend to introduce any new programs or to set any unrealistic new goals in the area of membership for the coming Rotary year. I will simply rely on you as responsible Rotarians to see to it that we have more fully paid members at the end of the year than we had at the beginning. And I will rely on you to do your best to see to the mentoring of our newest members, for retention is no less important than recruitment.

In Rotary, everything begins and ends with our clubs. Our clubs can and do work together; they work through their own districts, in cooperation with other clubs and districts, and with the support of our Foundation. But at the end of the day, everything that we accomplish is done through the strength of our clubs. And so each club must have autonomy to serve where and how it can serve best. It is not for any of us to limit a club's service to only the areas outlined from above in a given year.

But we also strive for continuity in our service, so that we may continue to go from strength to strength. This is why we have emphases, to encourage Rotary clubs to direct their work in the broad areas where we have seen the greatest need and the greatest benefit from Rotary service. Water, health and hunger, and literacy will be our emphases in the year ahead. In this Rotary year, I ask Rotarians everywhere to continue to learn from our experiences and to build upon our successes. I ask you all to continue to work for the health and well-being of not only children but their families, and of people everywhere.

Water is our first emphasis because it is the first necessity for every man, woman, and child. We could, I suppose, all live without oil, but we can none of us live without water. And so we must work to bring clean water to those who lack it, as well as ensure the safety of existing supplies. This is an area in which I have believed strongly, and worked consistently, for the last 20 years. And from my experience I will emphasize, as none of us can do too strongly, that water projects must encompass projects dealing with sanitation, because without adequate sanitation, our good work is easily undone.

Health and hunger is the tent within which so much of our Rotary service dwells. We must all remember that when we work in this area, we are also working toward the greater goal of peace - for how can there be peace in the world when so many will try to sleep tonight without having eaten today?

And we will strive as well to bring literacy, because, in the words of Nelson Mandela, "no country can succeed if its future leaders are not educated."

If Rotary is to be relevant in the 21st century, it must tackle these real problems of water, health and hunger, and literacy. And it must strive for continuity in the years ahead, which is why your Board of Directors, after consultation with clubs and districts, has adopted the Rotary International Strategic Plan.

The plan is designed to strengthen and proclaim the core values of Rotary: service, fellowship, diversity, integrity, and leadership. Service, because Service Above Self is our primary motto, and our reason for being. And Fellowship, because fellowship is why Rotary was founded. It is every bit as relevant today as it was in 1905; Rotary will only have a future if Rotarians look forward to every club meeting and every Rotary event. Diversity, because our diversity is our strength. Integrity, because if Rotary is about anything, it is about attaining and holding high ethical standards in business and private life. Rotarians' dignity and honesty should and must be translated into our business practices and everyday dealings. This must be done universally, by every single Rotarian, because just as a reputation takes a lifetime to build and a moment to destroy, so can the good name of all Rotarians be sullied by just a few. And leadership, because as Winston Churchill said, the price of greatness is responsibility. And the responsibility for Rotary is yours. Because The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands.

Whether Rotary will thrive or falter, whether our service will mean much to many or little to few, whether Rotary is known with respect or seen as a relic of days gone by - all this is up to you. The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands.

In Scotland, we have a saying that I'm fond of quoting: "We must look beyond our own parish pump." It means that we must look beyond our own home and our own community. We must look beyond our own needs, and we must be aware that ours is only one community, of one country, of the many communities and countries in this world.

In every one of those communities, there is work to be done. As Rotarians, we will not stand idly by. As Rotarians, we will accept our responsibility. We can, and we must.

My friends, I look forward to receiving your support to help me guide our wonderful organization on the path that has been laid out for us, toward a stronger Rotary and a better, healthier, and more peaceful world. I cannot do it alone. I will need your help. I know that you will not fail me, for I know that you care passionately about our organization. And the future of our organization is with you.

The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands.

John Kenny
RI President-elect