



RI PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

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Hello Rotary!

I am so heartened that each of you made it a priority to join together at this year's convention. I know this wasn't an easy lift. Many of you have traveled from great distances and made an incredible personal commitment of time and resources.

The past few years haven't been easy, and we've all been through so much. We have each experienced great hardship and yet also the best of humanity.

We have taken the best from the worst, and we are writing a new chapter in world history, one where we play a defining leadership role. That is why entering into this arena, walking through these hallways, connecting with each other gives us pause — a chance to connect as people of action, people of purpose, people crafting our own destiny. Over the next four days we will focus on hope, our dreams — on change and on our future.

That is why our theme for this convention, Imagine What's Next, is so important.

We have some important issues to discuss. Together, we are going to hear from some amazing speakers who are transforming health care, rethinking cities, advancing the cause of peace, and working to protect our environment. They share a vision of a more sustainable, more equitable world.

Nick and I have experienced many profound moments with so many of you this year. We have laughed together, we have cried together, we have danced together, and we have mourned together. A few weeks ago, we visited Adiyaman-Nemrut, Turkey, the site of unthinkable devastation.

On February 6 at 4:17 a.m., the Earth was upended as an earthquake moved through parts of Turkey and Syria. Hundreds of thousands of people were lying safely inside of their own homes, most still asleep, when more than 275,000 buildings collapsed and were reduced to rubble. There is a clock in the town center that stopped recording time at that very moment. It will be a lasting monument to the countless people who lost their lives, including Rotaractors and Rotarians who were part of our family. This was a different kind of war zone, one that wasn't provoked by mankind but instead the product of our planet.

It was there that we met Ferit, the president of the Rotary Club of Adiyaman. He himself lost 41 members of his family. It would be understandable for him to have fled, to have collapsed in grief.

Instead, he and his fellow members have been working tirelessly to create tent and container cities, feeding families and clearing unsafe areas. Providing hope and dignity to those who have lost everything.

This year alone, we have harnessed the power of our Disaster Response Fund unlike any other year in the past. We have moved tens of millions of dollars in aid into Ukraine and Pakistan. We have helped flood and tornado victims in the United States. There were mudslides and cyclones in Brazil and South Asia, and regrettably the list goes on and on.

And while we are not a disaster response organization, we breathe one air. And as people of action, we respond when disaster strikes.

That is because we are an organization without borders and boundaries. And when something happens to our family in another part of the world, it also happens to us.

When we talk about people of action, we have so many ways to interpret what this means. For some, it's a beach clean-up. For others, crafting large-scale global grants. And for Ferit, it means helping his community to recover and rebuild. We are there in these tough times. And just as importantly, we are proactive in creating conditions every day for a more peaceful, sustainable world.

I began this journey as your president hoping to sidestep the obvious conversation about being the first woman to lead our organization.

I was certainly excited by the attention Rotary was receiving for taking this new direction. And I saw the opportunity to leverage that, to use it as an opening to new conversations about who we are, what we do, and how the world can partner with us to achieve great things together.

Very soon, very soon, I discovered that something much bigger was happening in Rotary that I had no power to deny or evade. Rotary members started coming up to me with tears in their eyes. Women, yes, but other people who suddenly felt seen for the first time — people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community. Rotary members from all walks of life who felt our organization had just done something not just different and historic, but essential and exciting.

I have learned in the past year that the world is hungry for a new style of leadership, one that is empathetic, open, and eager to learn from everyone who participates in the act of change.

So yes, it does matter that I am a woman *and* the president of Rotary International.

As you know, I set a goal of reaching 30% female membership by this end of the *Imagine Rotary* year. It was a bold challenge in some areas of the world and an easy target in others.

I am very excited to share with you today that 124 of 193 countries have crossed this threshold, and I know many others are close behind. As a matter of fact, 30 of these countries are above 40%, and I am thrilled to share that an additional 31 countries have achieved gender parity.

And it's not just because we need women in Rotary. It's a business case as much as anything else.

Why would we not target an underperforming market share for improvement? And a special shoutout to Rotaract for paving the way. Gender parity is simply who they are.

With that, I'm delighted to share with you an important piece of news. The Trustees of The Rotary Foundation have selected our third Programs of Scale awardee. My friends, it will go to United to End Cervical Cancer in Egypt.

This program aspires to significantly reduce cervical cancer in Egypt by implementing a four-year campaign to increase awareness about cervical cancer and how to prevent it. The program will encourage the use of the HPV vaccine and promote screenings among women and girls in the greater Cairo region.

The implementation, experience, and data collected through this program will inform an evidence-based national strategy by the Egyptian government toward sharply reducing cervical cancer.

As a cancer survivor, I am proud that we are supporting this project — and am especially gratified that we are taking such an important step to support women's health. This project is further proof that Rotary is capable of creating large-scale, high-impact projects that create lasting change.

During our time here in Melbourne, we are going to Imagine What's Next in Rotary by putting a spotlight on people who have historically been overlooked, doing things that Rotary once thought was beyond our scope.

We are part of a rebirth of this organization. And it comes at a critical time, when leaders around the world are all grappling with the same challenges.

And that brings me to a second surprise I've discovered as president of Rotary. I came into this position wanting to meet with world leaders, and I had this idea that I could interview them and maybe find areas of understanding and need where we could work together. I had no idea what a thirst there was for this kind of dialogue.

I am extraordinarily grateful for the unique opportunity to have been able to compare and contrast nations and their leaders in real time — to help connect dots between what is happening in one part of the world and how it might benefit those in another.

What I soon discovered is that once those doors to global leaders were opened, they were just as eager to talk to me as I was to hear them.

I especially remember a recent meeting I had with a head of state — a woman, someone with literally the weight of the world on her shoulders. She immediately tossed away all formalities of the very well-planned event, and we jumped into a discussion about our dogs. And when we finally did get around to the substance, I asked her what, during her term, she is most proud of. She responded, pension reform and gay marriage. That surprised me, but in a way, it didn't.

Because what I keep hearing from leaders everywhere is the need to be both empathetic and practical. Real leaders, men and women, of all races and backgrounds, want to leave office with their house in order — and they want to expand the definition of belonging. They want to expand the definition of family and help build a better society.

I've seen this kind of impact throughout the year, in projects old and new, in all eight stops of the Imagine Impact tour. The Guatemala Literacy Project, one of the largest grassroots projects Rotary has ever conducted, has been helping children learn to read for more than 25 years. You will meet some of my friends later this week that will entertain and inform you about the impact.

I will always remember vividly my time in Uganda. I have deep affection for the Ugandan people. And as you know, one of our peace centers is based in Kampala. The heroic efforts to build and sustain Rotaract clubs in refugee settlements in that country have become part of our lore. They elevate us and show us all that we can be.

In Taiwan, we witnessed how a global grant project is helping Indigenous people transition their local economy away from growing produce affected by global warming and towards higher-yield, more sustainable products like chestnuts and truffles.

The tour made clear to me that there is so much positive change happening in the world. But not everything today is so rosy.

As anyone who has paid close attention to the news lately would know, several nations are facing new and dangerous threats against people in the LGBTQ+ community.

How can we uphold our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion if our members and people we serve in some countries face threats of imprisonment simply for being who they are?

How can we ask everyone to bring their full authentic selves to Rotary when those full authentic selves are considered criminal?

While we are a nonpolitical and nonreligious organization, we stand for human rights and human dignity.

As members, we must raise up those who are marginalized and use our collective strength to influence positive outcomes. If we don't, who will?

This means in countries where LGBTQ+ [people] are considered criminal, we must have a voice. In countries where women are not allowed to work because of menstruation, we must have a voice. In countries where corruption blocks access to basic food and medicine, we must have a voice.

And we must ensure that girls and boys have equal access to education. This is the cornerstone of humanity.

That is the challenge of leadership. It's one we are called upon to take up, because in Rotary, we are all leaders, and we are all responsible for the fate of our planet and our fellow human beings.

These are big dreams. Lofty requests. But that is what I see in each of you.

Together, we are the voice of civil society. And as brave and courageous leaders, I believe it is our duty, our responsibility, to foster world peace through understanding. I will always imagine that this is possible.

Thank you.