2023-24 THEME ADDRESS

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Isn't this a great time to be a member of Rotary? We are in the midst of a wonderful, historic year in Rotary. One that, in all honesty, no one is in any great hurry to end.

So instead of an ending, let's create a new beginning. Instead of closing the door on one year, let's build a bridge to the next one, because as long as a river flows, people will appreciate a way across.

I used to see an example of that every day as I drove to my dental practice in Edinburgh, past some of Scotland's most prominent landmarks, the bridges over the River Forth. Some of you will be aware of them. They are iconic pieces of engineering.

The Forth Bridge — the rail bridge — was opened in 1890.

The Forth Road Bridge was opened in 1964. And more recently, the Queensferry

Crossing Bridge was opened in 2017. The thing that always strikes me about the Forth Bridges, rail and road, every time I see them is that they were built by people who had vision. Vision for people they might never meet. Vision for people they would never know. Vision for people whose lives would be improved. That vision — even, as in the case of the Forth Bridge, 133 years after it was built — is appreciated by those who use them. Just as our vision in Rotary is appreciated by those whom we serve.

Now, for anyone rushing to create their own bridge logos, thinking that image has something to do with our theme, let me stop you right there. Not every metaphor is a theme. By the same token, not everything you will do over the next year will be related to advancing and supporting the theme that I will soon introduce.

We have been handed the reins of leadership at a very opportune moment, a historic time, when Rotary has a chance to capture the world's attention and point the way to possibilities way beyond our current expectations. Yet some of our best work may be supporting the continuing efforts of others. So, let's build upon what President Jennifer and other Rotary leaders have started and make it possible for even greater achievements ahead. So much of the work that I will do — and that everyone in Rotary leadership should do — is all about continuity.

Continuity means advancing the good ideas of leaders who came before you.

We should take inspiration from the words of poet Maya Angelou: "*Continue* / To be who and how you are / To astonish a mean world / With your acts of kindness."

Over the past several years, we have seen this commitment to continuity in action as one

Rotary president after another has made, kept, and built on promises to empower Rotaract. The results have been astonishing — and Rotaractors continue to encourage us with their eagerness to be not just full partners in Rotary, but leaders. Now it's up to us to make sure that Rotary and Rotaract clubs continue to find new ways to collaborate and support each other.

Another great example of continuity is Empowering Girls. President Jennifer set a wonderful example of this when she decided to continue President Shekhar's program, a commitment that in many respects Rotary has been building upon for years. It just took Shekhar to name and expand it. And I have made clear that I will build upon what both of these presidents have done to help girls, like my two granddaughters, Ivy and Florence, across the world grow into strong and fully empowered women.

I am also keen to fully support all of the progress our organization has made to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in everything we do. Fully supporting DEI doesn't just mean increasing numbers — although those numbers are very important. The most important aspect of DEI is making Rotary an open, inclusive organization that embraces the best people, the best ideas, and the best partnerships, no matter where they come from. People need to be able to look at Rotary and see themselves, and it is up to us to ensure that they do so.

There are two other aspects of continuity that will be vitally important to the work you do. The first involves polio. I'm sure you know that eradicating polio remains Rotary's top corporate priority. And there is so much we have done over the past 35 years of which we can be proud, as we have followed our dream of a polio-free world.

I also know that it can be a little fatiguing to be reminded each year just how close we are to finishing the job and how important it is that we raise at least $50 million each year to receive the full Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation match. Maybe we need an extra level of challenge right now. Only about one in 12 members of Rotary currently gives to the polio campaign, with fewer than one in five clubs donating each year.

With recent polio outbreaks in major metropolitan areas around the world, attention has once again shifted toward eradicating this terrible disease once and for all. And when that happens, Rotary will deserve enormous historical credit.

So, this is the time for us to go beyond what's necessary year to year and make sure we provide every resource necessary to succeed as quickly as possible. I need your help in creating a new sense of urgency, to create hope that we will finish the job on polio before even more outbreaks threaten the children of the world. I need your help to bring Rotary's dream to life.

We need to heed the insightful words of Jonas Salk, the creator of the polio vaccine, who said, "Hope lies in dreams, in imagination and in the courage of those who dare to [make] dreams into reality." These words are meaningful for all the work we do. They apply just as well to every aspect of the Rotary Action Plan. This plan is all about creating hope — and providing our members with the knowledge and courage they need to change. To accomplish this, we need to:

- Talk to our members about how to design service projects with known outcomes, grounded in evidence
- Engage with each other — and everyone we serve — with open, inclusive, and compassionate minds
- Look for every opportunity in the work we do — and the relationships we form — to transcend generations and borders

- And eagerly embrace new ideas and perspectives that can create lasting change in the world

To accomplish this, I hope you engage with fellow Rotarians on the goals of our Action Plan, because this is the best example of continuity in leadership — building off the best of Rotary's past to create something even greater.

One part of the Action Plan that I hope all of you have memorized by now is the vision statement: Together, we see a world where people unite and take action to create lasting change — across the globe, in our communities, and in ourselves. Embracing the Action Plan and giving clubs practical ways that they can implement it is the best way that you create lasting change in our communities.

I want to turn my focus now to the two other elements of the vision statement, creating lasting change across the globe and in ourselves. To do this, I want to focus on two specific, hopeful ways that we can bring these visions to life.

The first is putting a greater focus on peace. I have no doubt that the founders and builders of this organization would be proud of the hard work we have done in the past year to support the people of Ukraine as they have faced the brutal and unprovoked war with Russia.

As we have done many times in the past, Rotary has answered history's call and put humanitarian relief first. We have donated generously, supported our fellow members whole-heartedly, and earned the respect of the Ukrainian people, who continue to join us in greater numbers. And doesn't that tell us something about attracting and engaging members? But we know that true relief will not come for either the Ukrainian or, for that matter, the Russian people until there is peace. The same is true in Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, and dozens of other places of conflict across the globe.

Peace is the soil where hope takes root.

We till this soil every time we create new connections between people and find new opportunities for commonality. Over the next year, we will be introducing virtual international exchanges, and you will be hearing more about them later this week.

In Rotary, we know that peace is not a passive dream. It is an outcome of hard work, earned trust, and often difficult conversations. We know that peace must be waged persistently and bravely. The bravest goal a human being can set is the pursuit of peace, and in Rotary, everything we do, across all of our areas of focus, helps build the hope that, in turn, makes peace and redemption possible.

In 2006, I visited the village of Ban Taling Chan in Thailand, where Rotary members had provided new houses, a meeting hall, and a child care and a health care facility following the tsunami of late 2004. There, I was approached by a woman who looked as worn as you'd expect of someone who'd faced what she had. The woman offered me a beautiful seashell — this beautiful seashell.

She explained that the shell had been in her possession for more than 30 years. It was one of her very few remaining possessions, and initially I was reluctant to accept it, but she insisted on giving it to me as a token of her gratitude for what Rotary had done for her. Later on the tour, I saw the woman again and learned that she had lost her husband, daughter, and son in the tsunami. She told me that that disaster had taken everything. She lost her family, her home, her livelihood. And worst of all, she lost hope and all reason to continue living. But she went on to tell me that Rotary, thanks to all we had done to rebuild her community, had restored her optimism. She told me we had given her hope.

This is a beautiful shell. As I was planning the theme for our year and what it would mean, I was drawn not only to the shell but also to the colors of the world around us, which are used to great effect by one of Scotland's greatest living artists, John Lowrie Morrison OBE, also known as Jolomo,

whose paintings I have admired and collected for years. As we were selecting the colors for our ties and scarves, as you can see on the screen behind me, I wanted them to reflect the world's colors and more importantly what Rotary should focus upon in our year ahead.

The memory of the lady from Thailand and these colors made me realize what we should be seeking to do at this time, made me realize what our call to action is, made me realize what our theme should be, and so, I am delighted to tell you that our theme for 2023-24 will be *Create Hope in the World*.

Create hope in the world. This is how Rotary brings lasting change to the world: one newly created hope at a time. And the theme also begins to explain how we help create a similar kind of change within ourselves. Because for many people on this planet, lost hope is not just a function of material poverty. All of us face challenges that threaten our well-being. Just as it takes tremendous courage to wage peace, so too it is brave to reach out and admit that you need help.

In the wake of the pandemic, more people than ever are hurting. Many have lost the people closest to them. Others have seen their social networks uprooted. Divisions have grown wider. Opportunities for connection have been lost. Some of those hurting the most are the children and young adults whose education and social skill building has been so interrupted. To make matters worse, in many parts of the world, asking for help — especially in mental health — is considered a weakness. But nothing could be further from the truth. It is brave to be vulnerable and to admit you don't have all the answers.

Reaching out for help is courageous — and continuing on a path toward wellness is even more so.

Later this week, I will explain why I feel so strongly about the topic of mental health, and you will be hearing about some of the steps we will be taking over the next year and hopefully beyond to help improve the mental health system, not only for all Rotary members but for our communities as well. I want Rotary to become known as an organization that takes care of its members as well as the people we serve. Any mental health professional will tell you that, by helping others, we essentially help ourselves.

The evidence overwhelmingly shows that helping others benefits our mental health and well-being by reducing stress and improving our mood. The friendships developed along the way foster an incredible sense of community and camaraderie, themselves essential ingredients to mental health and wellness.

So, these are our plans for the year ahead: that we help bring peace to the world and soothe those afflicted by conflict, and that we help each other and our communities deal with our own internal struggles, and that we end the stigma associated with asking for help.

In all these actions, the goal is to create hope — to help the world heal from destructive conflicts, and, in turn, to help us achieve lasting change for ourselves. Rotary helps create the conditions for peace, opportunity, and a future worth living. By continuing what we do best, by remaining open and willing to change, and by keeping our focus on building peace in the world and within ourselves, Rotary helps create a more peaceful world, a more hopeful world. As Rotary's leaders from all the regions, I urge you to *Create Hope in the World*.