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RI President-elect

The moment when I learned of my nomination to be president of Rotary International was one of the most exciting and joyful moments of my life. I think this is true for every RI president and for everyone who is elected to a Rotary office for the first time. There is a feeling of great happiness, great honor, and great anticipation. There is also an understanding that your life will never be the same again. In the long term, I know I will be forever changed by the experiences I will have as president. And in the short term, I know that the responsibilities that I face, now and in the year ahead, will be unlike any I have faced before.

This is also true for all of you, as new district governors. There is so much that each of us can do as Rotarians. All of us have been in Rotary long enough to know and understand Rotary's power. Alone, we might be able to help individuals here and there, to make small changes, to help in small ways. Together, our abilities are stronger. Together, we really can make a lasting difference on a global scale. Together, there is no limit to what we can accomplish.

But when we truly understand the power that we have through Rotary, we must also understand that with this kind of potential comes tremendous responsibility. In each of our clubs, every year, we Rotarians decide how best to use the resources that we have: our time, our skills, and our funds. These decisions are not always easy or obvious. They are not simple questions of right or wrong. They are complicated questions of who needs our help the most and whom we can help the best. We want to use our resources efficiently, to maximize the good that we can do. Often, we are drawn toward needs that our hearts will not allow us to ignore. We aim always to strike a balance, to find the projects that will give the maximum benefit for our Rotary investment. We know that if we make our decisions well — if we do our research and understand the needs and

are wise and careful with our resources – we will do the most good with everything that we have.

That is our responsibility as Rotary leaders: to do the most good we can and to inspire other Rotarians to do the same. In the end, the responsibility for successful service projects lies with each individual club. But it is the job of the district governors and senior leaders to guide, to motivate, and to encourage our clubs to focus their efforts wisely. And it is my responsibility as president-elect to choose the year's theme and service emphases, which help to channel and define the work of the year ahead.

Like the project decisions of individual clubs, a president-elect's choice of emphases is a very serious matter. It is one that I spent many months considering. I thought carefully about the emphases of past presidents and looked at some of the many projects that these emphases had inspired. Water, literacy, health and hunger – these are the categories of Rotary service that have endured now for several years and with good reason. These are the areas in which local Rotary clubs, working individually and in cooperation with other clubs, can do the most good. They are areas in which we now have many years' experience and expertise. They are areas of wise Rotary investment. They are areas that let us do the most good with everything that we have. I knew with my mind that these were the emphases we should continue.

And yet, my heart was pulled in another direction. Because, in the midst of my research on possible emphases, I came across a number. That number was 30,000 – the number of children under the age of five who die every day from preventable causes. At first, I thought that it had to be a mistake. Perhaps there was an extra zero in that number, if not two. Perhaps the number was per month or per year. It was impossible, unthinkable, in the 21st century, that 30,000 of our most precious children could die, needlessly, every day. But there was no mistake. I asked, how can it be possible?

The answers were as heartbreaking as the number. Children die needlessly of pneumonia, measles, and malaria – for the lack of basic medicines, vaccines, and mosquito nets. They die of diarrheal illnesses – for the lack of a packet of rehydration salts that costs 10 cents. They die in the thousands, every day, because they have only dirty water to wash in and to drink. They are killed by illnesses that become deadly in combination with poor sanitation and malnutrition. They die because their families are trapped in a cycle of extreme poverty, a cycle that is not interrupted because there is no access to education. They die because their needs are not met in the areas of water, health and hunger, and literacy.

Once I understood this, and I understood the issues behind that terrible number, I knew what I needed to do. In 2008-09, Rotary will keep the service emphases

we have had in so many of our past years, the emphases that are solidly grounded in our knowledge and experience: water, health and hunger, and literacy. But this year, I will ask you to focus your efforts in each of these areas on children, and on reducing the terrible rate of child mortality in our world. In 2008-09, I will ask you all to Make Dreams Real for the world's children. This will be our theme, and my challenge to all of you.

We will Make Dreams Real by giving children hope and a chance at a future. We will Make Dreams Real by bringing clean water to their communities, and by this I mean not only providing safe water to drink but creating the sanitation projects that keep children healthy. We will be as proud of building public toilets as we are of supplying drinking water, because by improving sanitation, we prevent water from becoming contaminated, and we avoid so many needless deaths.

We will Make Dreams Real by giving children the chance at health through improving their environments and their access to care. So much can be done to keep children healthy, with so little: mosquito nets, rehydration salts, vitamins, and vaccines. And so much can be done with just a little bit more: a trained birth attendant, a simple clinic, a school feeding program, a visiting nurse. These are simple and direct ways to save children's lives.

And in 2008-09, we will Make Dreams Real by making sure that more children have a chance to go to school, because it will only be through education that the deadly cycle of poverty can be broken.

Although it is true that child mortality is highest in developing countries, there is not a single Rotary district where local club projects cannot save lives. Every day, in every part of the world, children die for the lack of a seatbelt or a smoke detector. Children die because they have nowhere safe to play. Children die because their parents cannot afford health care. Children die not because nobody can help them but because too often, nobody does. But you and I, here in this room, are Rotarians, and helping is what we do best. And so it is our job to open our eyes to these needs, in our own communities and in communities far away. Our job is to work together, one club with another, to do what is needed. Our job is to Make Dreams Real. We will turn those dreams of a safe and happy childhood — a childhood that becomes a long and healthy life — into a reality, because all of the world's children are our children.

And our job is a simple one. It is saving lives with our hearts and our minds and our souls. And if, in 2008-09, every one of us does this job well, at the end of our year we will all have achieved something wonderful.

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