

**World Food Prize Symposium 2002**  
Friday, October 25, 2002 - morning session

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2001-02 Rotary International President

It is a privilege, really, for Rotary International to be part of this outstanding program. We search for the truly one individual in the entire world each year that in our judgment contributes to world understanding and peace, which is the mission of Rotary Clubs all over the globe. And it was a privilege for me in Barcelona, Spain, to present the award this year to Dr. Norman Borlaug and then to be invited at Ken Quinn's invitation to come here and be with you at this event and to really learn and see more about what's going on with the World Food Prize Foundation and organization.

Our theme in Rotary this past year was taken from Charles Dickens' classic, *A Christmas Carol*. I believe it is the business of every individual – mankind is our business. And in Rotary we like to have a little fun, too, so the theme comes with a theme pin and theme hats, theme T-shirts, theme underwear, theme neckties. And I went to Como, Italy. I was with Jacques Diouf. I'm sorry that he couldn't be with us this morning.

We had a big Rotary conference at the Food and Agricultural Organization in Rome about six months ago, and we had about a thousand Rotary leaders from throughout Italy to come and talk about Rotary's involvement in food distribution around the world. And I'll get to that in just a moment.

But while I was there, I went to Como, Italy, and I had some beautiful silk neckties crafted. They tell me at Nordstrom's out in California these would be a lot of money, but I got a lot of these left over, and I got to get rid of them somewhere. So it's with a lot of ceremony that I want to present one of these to Ken Quinn for his work, a scarf for his wife. Come over here, Ken, will you? Take these.

[Ambassador Quinn: Oh, that's very nice. Thank you, thank you.]

It bothers me when I see a guy dressed so nice like this that isn't wearing a Rotary pin. The symbol of excellence and leadership in Rotary is the bald eagle flying through the sky with a notation, *Eagles are like leaders. One never sees them in a flock. They always soar high above the crowd. A commitment made and kept.* And I agree with Al that you've done a remarkable job here, and so I'm going to present you, as a distinguished American citizen, with the bald eagle of Rotary, *A commitment made and kept.* God bless you.

[Thank you, thank you.]

I come here this morning amongst a panel of very distinguished experts in the field. I'm just a volunteer. I represent volunteers. Rotarians belong to the oldest service club in the world. It began in Chicago in 1905. And the idea was to help people who couldn't help themselves. Rotarians quickly learned that in the process, of course, as we all know, it is usually the helper who gets helped the most.

In the early days they didn't have anyplace to meet, so they would rotate the meeting place at each other's homes or places of business on a weekly basis. And because they were rotating every week, they called themselves the Rotary Club of Chicago. And so it was, 97 years ago, that the world's oldest, most international service organization had its beginnings from that very, very small beginning – just four men: a lawyer, a tailor, a mining engineer and a jeweler; two Protestants, a Catholic and a Jew.

From that very small beginning the organization today flies its flag on the soil of 204 countries and geographical regions of the world, 31,256 Rotary Clubs. And we had tremendous growth last year, particularly in a dozen countries – India, the United States, Korea, the Philippines, Italy, Brazil, Germany, Nigeria, Bangladesh, England, Turkey, all over the globe. I think it was an aftermath of 9/11. People came together and said, “You know, we really need to do something, our share, to make the world better.”

So I'm not an expert in food, except that my wife's always trying to get me to eat a little less, but I represent volunteers who are trying to make the world a better place. And so it is that I established a Hunger Task Force when I was the president of Rotary International last year, and I asked the distinguished Rotarians – and Bob Cook, one of the vice-chairmen from Ohio I know is here – I asked a number of them to help us figure out ways to feed people all over the world. After all, we are a hard-working group of private citizens.

We've now immunized over two billion children in the world against polio, and we anticipate that we will eradicate this disease by the time we celebrate our 100th birthday in 2005, just three years from now. When we began, there were 350,000 cases of polio, primarily in Africa and Third World countries reported annually in some 150 different countries. Today we're down to our last ten countries. Rotary International and governments of the world and the United Nations agencies have invested two billion dollars in this campaign. The United States Senate has called it the greatest private initiative, private-public health initiative ever undertaken in the history of man on this planet.

And if Rotary can eradicate, for the second time in human history, a disease after smallpox in 1979, why not hunger? We've had several papers written in Rotary about the problem of hunger and water in our world. We've come to the conclusion that there's enough food. The problem is distribution and how to get it to the people that really need it. That's the miracle and the magic of Rotary because we don't send our money to governments. We administer our funds ourselves.

And it is Rotary volunteers – lawyers and doctors and dentists and undertakers and bakers and ambassadors and all kinds of people representing practically every vocation, even actors – and we bring them together. They wear the Rotary wheel, and we go out and we handle the

distribution of our own funds so that it gets to the people who really need it. Because it is Rotary's conviction that if we could solve the distribution problem, particularly in Third World countries, there is enough food and we can grow enough food with the technology that we know, and particularly with the work that's being done by people that were honored last night – the tremendous number of outstanding people in this world who have contributed so much to figuring ways to get food to hungry people.

Last year we initiated in Rotary a drip irrigation system for Taranamara Indians in Mexico. We sent dehydrated food to Haiti and Guatemala and Ethiopia and Romania and many other countries. We contracted a study to apply dehydration technology as a means to balance food supplies in Ethiopia. The idea here is to figure out ways to preserve excess commodities during times of plenty for times of recurrent draught.

We took villages in Nicaragua and changed the entire villages, moved families from dumps to dwellings, with seeds and animals and tools. For \$800 United States dollars Rotary builds a shelter, a house, two slab rooms and a toilet, and we give them to young mothers and their children free of charge all over the world. Most of the time these people have lived in garbage dumps and/or cardboard boxes in the streets of humanity.

And I tell you when people ask me why I am involved in volunteer work, I say to them, "Have you ever seen the look on the face of a young mother holding her two children when you hand them the key to the first house." It's not much of a house the way you and I know houses, but it's a palace to them. The first time they ever have a chance to see their own dwelling. People who have lived in garbage dumps all their lives and young children and watch the look on this mother's face as she takes these kids across the threshold and takes them into this place. I tell you, it has done more to change my life and made me a better citizen of this world than anything else I've ever done professionally.

I believe that Scrooge was right when he said to the ghost Jacob Marley, "Business? Mankind was my business." And I believe as a Rotarian that no matter how much success one achieves academically, professionally, financially, socially, culturally, with the accolades of people, no matter how much success one achieves, nothing can compensate for failure in the business of mankind.

We had a tremendous challenge after 9/11. One of the challenges, of course, was to help those people in New York City and in Washington, DC. But another challenge that came to my attention were the hundreds of thousands of refugees, many of them children, in Afghanistan. Children of course always bear the brunt of war and devastation. And so I appealed to the Rotarians, the Rotary leaders of the world, to send us some of their excess contribution money, and we raised several million dollars.

And I sent a task force to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Lenmar Brock of the Brock Food Company in Pennsylvania – a man who really ought to know more about what's going on here, because his business is food, a distinguished American and a distinguished Rotary leader, a past international director – and I asked him, I called him into my office in December of last year, and I said,

“Lenmar, I’d like you to go to Pakistan and Afghanistan.” Not the most exciting assignment, particularly at that particular time. It’s really a difficult, challenging assignment today.

But he said he would go, as Rotary volunteers usually do say, “Yes, I will go.” And he went over there three different times, and we distributed medicine and food, clothing, books to kids, 48,000 of them in a particular refugee camp, who really had no parents, no medicine, no food, no clean water, no clothes, no hope, no future. And I believe that Lenmar came back a changed man, as we all do when we participate in making the world somewhat better.

Rotary is interested in what you do here, and we commend you for your being here. A lot of people have written papers in this country the last few years, which if I had to summarize them, come under the heading of “The Decline of Social Capital.” That is to say, we’ve always had economic capital in this country, but many, many social anthropologists and cultural anthropologists in this country have lamented the decline of community involvement, people who want to make a difference to make the world better.

They talked about the fact that people don’t vote as much as they used to, and people don’t join PTAs as much as they used to, and people don’t join service organizations as much as they used to, and people don’t go to church as much as they used to.

Robert Putman of Harvard University probably wrote the best paper, and I read a lot of them, called “Bowling Alone.” And in Rotary we have been concerned because it is social capital, the kind of involvement where people come together to make the world better that I submit, and Rotary International argues, is going to change the human race in the 21st century.

The reason we do it, of course, is because we are selfish. When someone else has enough to eat, the world is a safer place for everybody on the planet. And I think people are motivated by feeling. Oh, you can be motivated by talk and by smell and by touch and taste and sight and hearing. But it’s my judgment that people are motivated most by what they feel. And when they feel something, they are moved to action.

And I’ll tell you the reason I’m here this morning in the capacity as a past world president of Rotary is because the theme here is water, and I learned graphically what it meant to people who didn’t have it, maybe a dozen years ago when I went, my first trip to Addis Ababa. I had been asked by Rotary to go on a long journey throughout Africa, five weeks, and they gave me a position paper. And they said some of these countries, half the people are starving to death, and the other half have AIDS. So my wife was not thrilled with this assignment. It wasn’t Waikiki. But we went.

And at the end of the five weeks we landed about 11 months after the tossed out the Marxists and began to try to restore some sort of free enterprise and democracy to Ethiopia. Once upon a time, when Haile Selassie was on the throne of Ethiopia, we had a lot of strong Rotary in that country – ancient Biblical land, very proud and distinguished people. But of course during the 20 years of Marxist rule, Rotary had been thrown out; in fact, many of the Rotarians had been killed because it was considered that they were traitors and treasonists to the Marxist Regime.

And now it was 11 months after the Marxists had been overthrown, and they had invited us to come to try to help restore Rotary in Ethiopia. And so we landed at midnight. Literally the lights on the airway would not go on. The place was decimated. We walked down the steps of the airplane, very tired, and standing there were a half a dozen very proud Ethiopians.

I knew the 65-year-old lawyer who stepped forward. I had read his background. He had been an advisor to the Emperor Haile Selassie and was a very proud man, a distinguished lawyer in that country. But when they killed the emperor, they took this man's wife away from him. They took away his law practice, they took away his house, they took away all his money, they took away one of his children, and they put him in prison where he sat for 18 years, and they sentenced him to die. Once a week his wife was allowed to visit him and bring him a home-cooked meal.

And so there he was at midnight as I got off the plane. And he was standing there with tears streaming down his cheeks, a 65-year-old man standing as proud as he could be, with the one thread-bare suit that he owned. And he told me they were very happy and honored that I had come. He had just been released from prison 11 months earlier. Somehow he had escaped dying, and he said, "We're very proud to have you here, and we thank you for coming." And I said, "Well, all we want is eight hours sleep, and then tomorrow morning we'll get up, and we'll start rebuilding Rotary in this country."

He looked down on the ground as if there wasn't a place for me to sleep, and I was concerned, and I took his arm, and he said, "Oh, no, Rick, we have a place for you to sleep, but we were kind of hoping you'd get up very early and drive with us. We want to show you a project." And so four hours later, 5 a.m., my wife and I were in a Jeep and we drove a hundred miles north into the highlands of Ethiopia, six or seven hours. And we passed very hungry, starving children by the side of the road.

And eventually we came to a meadow, not perhaps quite as large as this ballroom. And way in the corner I saw for the first time the project they had wanted me to see. It was one single well. And there was a plaque on the side of the well, and it said, "This well was dug with contributions from Rotarians in the United States of America." And they were particularly anxious to have an American come so they could take his photograph beside the plaque.

And so I walked across the meadow, and I looked at the plaque, but to this day it's the six or seven young children who were standing on the other side of the well whose faces I will never forget. I would say they were maybe six, seven, eight years old. And one boy stepped forward. I guess he was the spokesman, and he thanked me for the visit to the village and said, "Thank you for our well."

Each of these young boys, you could see their rib cages and their eyeballs, and they were holding a little brass cup about this big, down by their side. And my aid leaned into my ear, and he said, "You see, Rick, today's the day they get to come to the well and they get to fill their cup half full

with fresh water, and that's the amount of water they get to drink every two days." What they wouldn't give for the water we're going to leave in these bottles on this table today.

And they were waiting permission, so thirsty, to dip their cups half full to get their portion of clean water for 48 hours.

I have received a lot of gifts from people all over the world – swords and crystals and photographs and wonderful things – but in my office I have one of those little brass cups. The Ethiopian Rotarians came to me last year, and they presented it to me. And they said, "We remember your visit, and we thought maybe you'd like to have one of these cups." The cup is not worth a dime. It's a cheap thing as cups go. But he said, "We've engraved three words on this cup, Rick. *You touched us.*" And I looked at him and his lovely presentation speech, and I said, "You're wrong. I didn't touch you, but, oh, how those children touched me."

So what we do here is important. I believe it is God's work on earth. In the words of Nobel Prize winner, distinguished Rotarian Gabriel Mistral, "The child cannot wait. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, his senses being developed. To him we cannot answer tomorrow. His name is *Today.*"