

# PR Is Good Works Publicly Recognized

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Past District Governor

What a joy it is to be with you this afternoon. I want to begin by telling you a story.

A few years ago my husband, Nick, and I traveled to a small island to do some volunteer work. Nick is a family doctor, and they asked us to travel to a remote village hours away to provide some medical care. A doctor was an unusual luxury and one they had rarely seen in the past.

We stepped into a rickety little boat and began a journey out over the ocean toward this village. When we began to approach the shoreline, something magical happened. It became lined with hundreds of children. The closer we came, we began to see them in detail — many of them naked, some wearing tattered T-shirts and others clinging on to adult-sized underwear; most of them with distended bellies, a sign of kwashiorkor or what is better known as malnutrition; most of them appeared happy and playing as children do. They didn't know they were sick.

We set up a small clinic, and the people lined up around the building, there to see "the medicine man." We had the aid of a translator, and I took notes. Many people filed through that day, and interestingly they presented with many of the same issues that we see in developed countries, like diabetes or high blood pressure.

But there were two men, both in their mid twenties, who showed up at different points in the afternoon, both with the same symptoms. Through the translator, Nick was able to ask probing questions. They both talked about "the fever" in their bellies. It was their way of describing pain. The reality was the only time they didn't feel the fever was the once or twice in a week that they'd had a meal. They didn't need a diagnosis — they needed food.

I don't tell you this story to make you sad. I tell you this because I believe that when we share our stories, they motivate people to action. I am proud to tell you that with the aid of Rotarians and many others, there is now a school in this village, their very first. It has a food program that feeds the children and many others in the village. And doctors now regularly travel there to provide care.

Public relations is about telling our story.

I'm going to ask you a question, but there is no need to raise your hand. How many of you have cherished memories of being told a story or read a favorite book when you were a child?

Those stories remain with us. It is that same art of storytelling that is at the core of good public relations.

When we share the story of our annual pancake breakfast fundraiser, it's not about the pancakes, is it? In our news releases and media interviews, it's about the beneficiaries of our actions — the families who receive clean water because of a well that was built with the funds we raised, or the park that will now accommodate children with physical disabilities. This is how we paint the picture of Rotary — we make the connection for people to our good works.

I want to talk with you today about the importance of public relations to our organization. It used to be that we were encouraged to do our good work quietly and not for recognition. It has really only been over the past decade that telling our story has become one of our key strategic initiatives. In fact, it is now included in RI's strategic plan. Our senior leaders have learned that it is a key to our success.

When Bill Gates appeared on this stage last year, he provided more than the precious dollars that he came bearing and entrusted to Rotary. He provided organizational legitimacy. He said, I trust you, and I know what you are doing. He knew our story, the story of polio.

This message provided a public relations surge like none other, and surely one we could have never afforded. Not only did his and his wife Melinda's gift aid us in providing those lifesaving drops, it showed to the world that we were the trusted captains of this race, and it breathed new life into our campaign, our organization, and our volunteers. Not that we aren't already seen as a legitimate force in the world, but we all know too well that we haven't reached far enough with our story. There are many more people to touch, many more to engage in Rotary.

Bill Gates knew our story.

We see now more than ever that clubs that have good public relations are clubs that are growing. Public relations is actually one of our best progressive tools for membership, both recruitment and retention. When we tell our story, like-minded people want to join with us. It makes it much easier to ask someone to be part of Rotary when they are already aware of who we are and what we are doing.

If you have gleaned anything in the past few minutes, I hope it's that good public relations is about telling our story. You may, however, still be asking, how do I make this happen when I am not an expert?

The first thing you must realize is that this is not your job alone: Good public relations is every member's obligation, one that starts by wearing our Rotary pin every day. We are all ambassadors of this organization.

So how do we showcase what is valuable to us? Not too long ago, I was in Chicago visiting my brother. We went shopping one afternoon, and the only thing I wanted to purchase was a gratitude journal. This was a trend a few years ago, where you would write down three things a day that you were grateful for, the premise being that it helped you to manifest the power of positive thinking. I thought this was a good thing.

We were in a lovely little boutique when I found "my book." Very quietly, I said to my husband, "This is my gratitude journal." I looked around a bit more and then went up to the counter to pay. I watched as the clerk went down to one end of the counter and took out this beautiful tissue paper and carefully wrapped the book. He then went to the other end of the counter where to found a blue box with gold lines all over the top. He finished it off with an elaborate ribbon and then came forward to give it to me.

He said, "I couldn't help but overhear what you said, that this is going to be your gratitude journal. I want to be your first entry in your book. I want you to write that the man that sold me this book made it an even more beautiful experience." He is indeed the first entry.

So how do we showcase what is important to us? What's the packaging, the special ribbons that we wrap around Rotary to make it even more beautiful? We do it through public relations. We do it by telling our story.

Because Rotary has made public relations a priority, there are many resources for you to turn to. So when you go to your PR toolbox, what can you expect to find?

The most effective tool created over the past five years is the Humanity in Motion DVD. This contains an extraordinary set of public service announcements that can be used for print, radio, television, and billboards.

These ads are easy to customize, and they provide a template so that Rotary looks the same no matter where you are located. Consistency and continuity are absolutely critical to our success.

They enhance our brand.

One of our best resources is that of our human resources. Rotary International has identified Rotarians who are public relations specialists in every corner of the world. You can receive a list of the zone coordinators for your area at the Public Relations booth while you are here. These members of the Public Image Resource Group are trained to assist you and your district public relations chairs. They will provide guidance, support, and valuable tips on communicating with your key audiences.

This brings up one of the most important concepts in public relations: identifying your audience. Oftentimes, we think of public relations as only being our communications with the media. While this is important, it is equally valuable that we communicate with our own members first. They help us to amplify what we are saying by knowing what to say!

One of our current directors, Tom Thorfinnson, shared a compelling story when I attended this International Assembly as a district governor-elect. He told us about his volunteer experience in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. He traveled repeatedly to these countries, helping to create sources of clean water. One day, one of his fellow Rotarians was talking with a village elder, who shared with him the most profound observation: "When the well was built, the children stopped dying."

With one simple sentence, he made people understand why clean water was so important. He put the human face on the issue. It wasn't about the facts and figures or asking people to support building a well. It got right to the core of the issue: "When the well was built, the children stopped dying."

What are the humanitarian stories in your district? Think of their impact and how you can deliver these stories within your own community. We have a powerful product and one that is easy to share. If you have not already named a district public relations chair, I encourage you to return home and find the most qualified Rotarian for this job. That person is then charged with encouraging clubs to name their own public relations chair and training them so that they can reach out and tell our story. For those of you who have already done this, I congratulate you and ask you to provide mentorship to those around you who are just learning about public relations.

One of the final concepts that I want to share with you this afternoon is the significant role that partnerships play in making public relations come to life. I have already touched on our relationship with the Gates Foundation. This is a wonderful example of how we can harness the power of partnerships to strengthen our organization. So what does this mean to you?

This is one of the primary reasons why RI's district Public Relations Grants were created. These grants are a perfect way to reach out to the media to be partners in our efforts. You have just seen some great examples of how districts in different parts of the world formed partnerships to achieve great results. Engaging the media as our partner is one way that we can tell our story in the most cost-effective way possible.

These are all concepts that you will continue to explore during your discussion session this afternoon. And while our public relations efforts are fairly new, PR is one of the most dynamic and compelling aspects of our leadership efforts today.

There's one final story that I want to share with you, one that affected me deeply. As a member of an international district, one that spans Canada and the United States, I cross the border many times during a week. Every time I pull up to the border, there is a guard there ready to ask me a battery of questions on my reason for crossing. So it was that I found myself face to face with an officer who was not having a good day.

With his arms crossed and a stern look on his face, he asked where I was going. I told him I was attending a Rotary meeting. He grimaced, "Rotary? What's Rotary?" So perhaps I was a bit

cheeky when I asked him if he would like the long version or the short version. He barked back, "Just tell me what it is!"

I told him that we were an international service organization of 1.2 million men and women around the world conducting humanitarian service in our own backyard and beyond. And then he barked again, "But what do you do?"

So I told him about my home club and our projects and programs, but he wanted more. I told him about clean water and health and hunger and literacy and then polio. And then he started to lean forward.

"Polio? Polio is gone," he said. I told him yes, it was gone from many parts of the world but that it remained in four countries and that we were working very hard to reach every last child.

At this point, he changed. He wanted even more. He now started to become engaged and asked, "But what about AIDS? What are you going to do about AIDS?" I explained to him that indeed many Rotarians were involved in helping with AIDS and malaria and tuberculosis and much more.

And then he said, "You mean to tell me that there are that many people in the world with that much extra time on their hands?" And I said, "No sir, there are that many people in the world with no time on their hands who are committed to helping."

And then he started to cry, and he looked into my eyes and said, "Please thank the people. Please thank them for what they are doing." At this point my eyes also filled with tears. He then said, "You have made my day," and I told him, "No, sir, it is you who has made mine."

And so, I carry his message here today to say thank you. Thank you for all that you have done and all that you are going to do. You have already been touched deeply by this organization, or you wouldn't be sitting here. When you tell the story, you are inspiring your clubs and preparing them for the year ahead.

I will leave you with my favorite quote, one by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "Everyone has the power for greatness, not for fame, but for greatness. Because greatness is determined by service."

It is time to tell our story. It is time for Rotary to shine more brightly than ever. It is time for us to inspire those around us to greatness.