

PACE School for Girls

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Please allow me to begin with a great big thank-you to President D.K. and President-elect John for giving me this honor to come and speak to you about this ordinary Rotarian's quest to make her dreams real, a dream that began with a desire to eradicate extreme poverty through the gift of education.

Poverty. What is that word, poverty? What does that word mean to you in the context of your life, your community, or your country? Is poverty the same in the UK as it is in Africa, for example? The answer is obviously not!

Here is what the word meant to a great philosopher just a few years back: "Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime." Believe it or not, that profound statement is perhaps more true today than during Aristotle's time. Why do I say that? Because currently, half the human population are living on less than \$2 a day, and that, my friends, is something we should be concerned about. So, let us take a few minutes to understand the definition of this profound condition.

People who are involved with poverty-related work generally agree that there are three broad categories of poverty: extreme, moderate, and relative. To understand these three broad categories easily, please look at this simple graphics presented here. Imagine the flat, round surface represents society and the ladder represents people's ability to climb to the next level of existence.

The less area that the round surface, or society, provides in terms of the basic services needed for existence, the narrower the ladder — meaning that very few people can ever get to even the first step of the ladder, let alone climb it. Notice also, not only is the ladder narrower but there are many more steps involved, indicating the difficulty of such a climb.

As society or outside sources, like Rotary, begin to provide these basic services, the ladder becomes wider with fewer steps to climb, giving the citizens living in these communities greater chances to climb out of poverty.

Due to lack of time, I am not going to discuss moderate or relative poverty in great detail, but know that in moderate poverty, people are living on less than \$2 to \$3 a day, and it is found mainly in Central and South America and pockets of it in other parts of the world.

Relative poverty is what we have in the UK, the United States, and other developed countries. In the U.S., this level of poverty is defined as a family of four living on less than \$40 to \$50 a day.

As my dream involves the eradication of extreme levels of poverty, let us now look at how we define this category. You will see images of people living in extreme poverty and their living conditions behind me as I describe them.

These are people who are living on less than \$1 to \$2 a day. They have no access to clean water, sanitation, or any other utilities. They have no way of providing proper housing or enough food or medical care for themselves or their children. They and their children are always sick and always hungry, causing many hunger- and disease-related deaths, contributing greatly to the infant mortality statistics that our President D.K. is so passionate about reducing. Their children do not go to school; instead, most are sent off to work or are sold, particularly girls, to help augment the family's income.

And what have these conditions produced in our planet today?

- Half the human population living on less than \$2 a day
- More than 1.5 billion people living with no access to clean water
- More than 2.6 billion people living with no access to proper sanitation
- 26,000 children dying each day from preventable causes
- More than 134 million children not going to school on an annual basis
- More than 300,000 children getting engaged as soldiers against their wishes
- More than two million children, mostly girls, getting sold each year as slaves or for the sex trade

Over the years, I have found such numbers absolutely staggering, and when I have seen the images of people, particularly children, living in extreme poverty, I have not been able to stop my tears. I have wondered, how did the human race get to this point? I have felt overwhelmed and for years I have wondered, What can I do? I am just one ordinary human being.

But then I became a Rotarian! My tears stopped and in 2003, as I read our then-President Jonathan Majiyagbe's message of lending a hand, I felt inspired to create a dream for myself. I told myself that I would *Lend a Hand* by giving the gift of education, particularly to the girl child.

Thus began the dream called PACE Universal, PACE which stands for Promise of Assurance to Children Everywhere. It is a U.S. not-for-profit organization, made up of many of my Rotarian friends and colleagues who serve on the board with me. Our local partners, in the fulfillment of this dream, have been Past District Governor Vijay Bhandari and the Rotary Club of Calcutta Metropolitan, many of whose members are here today and all of whom have become like my family in the city of my birth.

Our first school, the Piyali Learning Center, known as PLC, is a simple village school. It is currently teaching 130 girls in a rented facility, providing all academic, nutritional, cultural, and medical care services to its students; is providing adult education and vocational training to parents; and soon is going to be the cooperative organization for the implementation of the village rehabilitation program under the 3-H grant which the Trustees have awarded to us this April.

PACE has purchased land and we are now in the midst of a capital campaign to build the permanent building. When completed, this prototype permanent building will offer education

to 600 girls and 400 boys, and it will be the focal point for providing programs that will result in lifting the citizens of that community out of extreme poverty.

We have already achieved much success, so much so that many of my fellow Rotarians from District 5240, who have visited the site or have heard me speak, are embarking on duplicating this model in Mexico, in Honduras, and hopefully soon in Romania, making their dreams real.

You see, my friends, I started this journey with a very small spark in my heart, believing that if I light a small flame somewhere in the world, then that flame will inspire many of you to formulate your own dreams and create your own sparks. And soon, with all the dreams in our hands, we can spread the word of Rotary and begin to eradicate that which is not just, and that which we ought not tolerate — and that is the existence of extreme poverty.

Why? Because, please remember that this planet's well-being is in our hands through Rotary.

Thank you for listening, and *namaste*.