

Call me Barry

Rotary's new president, Barry Rassin, strikes a perfect balance between Bahamian bonhomie and decisive leadership.

Several miles off the shoreline of Nassau, Bahamas, 2018-19 Rotary International president Barry Rassin balances in the bow of the bobbing Rat Bat. There are no colossal cruise ships out here, no noisy jet skis, only the occasional passing pleasure boat and the sound of water lapping against the hull. In the turquoise sea below, giant turtles glide across the ocean floor.

"To me," Barry says, "the sea is freedom, it's peacefulness. When I'm out on the water, everything fades away. You feel like you're at one with the world and nothing could go wrong."

A few minutes ago, it was drizzling, but now the weak December sun struggles to peek through. The Rat Bat sways suddenly in the wake of a passing vessel. Unfazed, Barry stands perfectly poised, staring toward a patch of blue sky floating on the horizon.

Haiti – Them and Us

Late in the afternoon of January 12, 2010, Barry and his wife, Esther, were at home in Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas, when a magnitude 7.0 earthquake rocked Haiti, 550 miles away. Shortly thereafter, Barry got a call from Errol Alberga in Jamaica. At the time, Errol was the governor of District 7020, which encompasses the Bahamas, Jamaica and Haiti, as well as several other island nations in the West Indies.

Errol told Barry – a former governor of the district and president of the renowned Doctors Hospital in Nassau – about the earthquake and asked him to lead Rotary's relief efforts. Barry spent the rest of the evening pacing around his living room as he called other Rotary leaders in the region. In a corner of the room, a television broadcast images of Haiti in ruins – and then, scrolling across the bottom of the screen, came the emergency warning that caught Barry's eye: A tsunami might be headed for the Bahamas; a seismic sea wave so formidable it had the potential to wash over the entire country.

Barry and his wife walked out onto their second-floor balcony and waited.

"At night, if you look out toward the ocean, all you see is lights stretching down to the edge of the water, and then everything turns black," Barry recalled in a powerful speech he delivered in January at the International Assembly in San Diego. "I looked at where the lights ended and the black began, and I waited for the blackness to come toward us and swallow the light."

Fortunately, the tsunami failed to materialise, and Barry got back to work. Over the next few days and weeks, as Richard McCombe, another past district governor, headed Rotary's day-to-day response, Barry coordinated long-term recovery efforts funded by donations from Rotarians around the world to The Rotary Foundation. He created a 132-page spreadsheet to track each detail: how much money was available; how much had been spent; which Rotary club was in charge of which initiative.

"At the district conference the year after the earthquake, Barry went through the dollars for every single project," says Lindsey Cancino, past president of the Rotary Club of East Nassau, Barry's club. "It matched to the penny what was in the [disaster recovery] account. I was mesmerised."

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, Barry worked with Claude Surena, a Haitian doctor and Rotarian who had turned his home outside Port-au-Prince into a makeshift shelter and hospital. There, Claude provided care for more than 100 displaced people. Elsewhere on the island, tens of thousands were dead and tens of thousands more injured. In nightly calls to Barry and his team, Claude – who, at the behest of René Préval, then president of Haiti, would later oversee the recovery of the nation's private and public health sectors – detailed the medicine and other supplies he urgently needed. And then, each morning, a private plane flew from Nassau packed with the necessary goods.

Barry decided to tag along on one flight. On the four-hour journey, flying low over the ocean, he gazed out at the limitless blue of the sky and an azure sea dotted with green tropical islands.

"It just looked like paradise," Barry said in his speech. "And then we came in over Haiti."

On the ground below, he saw buckled roads, collapsed houses and entire neighbourhoods turned to rubble. Unable to land in Port-au-Prince, the plane touched down on a grassy strip outside the capital. After unloading its cargo, the plane headed for home.

"In a couple of minutes, we were out over the water," Barry recalled in his speech, "looking down on that same gorgeous view. Haiti disappeared behind us, the Bahamas lay in front of us, and there we were, in between."

“And looking down at that water, out at that horizon, I realised that there was no line, no boundary between there and here, between them and us; between the suffering we had escaped and someone else hadn’t. It could just as easily have been the Bahamas. It could just as easily have been us.”

Reigning gracefully

As befits an island organisation, the Rotary Club of East Nassau meets inside a wood-panelled room at a yacht club. Pictures of sailboats bedeck the walls. Sir Durward Knowles, who, until his death in February, reigned as the world’s oldest living Olympian (bronze and gold medals in sailing in 1956 and 1964, respectively), was an active member.

In many ways, it’s the ideal 21st-century Rotary club: 60 per cent of its members are younger than 50 and one member is a dual Rotarian/Rotaractor. At a meeting in October, there were so many women in leadership positions that a man didn’t come to the lectern for the first half-hour. One order of business: handing out attendance awards. Barry receives one for 30 years of perfect attendance. Since joining in 1980, he has missed only one meeting.

Though Rotary has been central to Barry’s life for nearly 40 years, it was never his goal to become president of Rotary International. He was loath to even put his name up for consideration. But, he explains, “The Bahamas and the Caribbean have never had a president, and Rotarians there felt I should put my name in and represent them. I realised that they want to feel part of Rotary, and I was in a position where it was possible. So, for them, I thought I should do it.”

Sam Owori, a member of the Rotary Club of Kampala, Uganda, was nominated in 2016 to serve as Rotary’s 2018-19 president. After he died unexpectedly of complications from surgery in July 2017, Barry was selected to take his place.

Among the first people Barry called was John Smarge, a past Rotary International director from Florida, US, who had served as Owori’s aide. Barry asked John to serve as his aide, too.

“One of his first sentences was, ‘I want Sam’s memory to continue and I want you to help me do that,’” John recalls. “Barry was uniquely qualified to come in at this time. He will allow Sam’s memory to shine brightly.”

John and Barry have known each other for two decades. They’re from the same Rotary zone and served as district governors around the same time. They worked together closely after the earthquake in Haiti and served as account holders of the Haiti Earthquake Relief Fund, a donor-advised fund established through the Foundation that supported projects totalling \$6.5 million.

“Barry Rassin is a rock star in Haiti – there’s no other way to say it,” John says. “He’s a rock star because they know what he’s done for that country.”

Barry may be a Rotary rock star and the pride of the Caribbean, but he shuns the limelight, says his friend Felix Stubbs, and considers himself a regular guy. Back when he ran Doctors Hospital, it was not uncommon to see him roaming the halls in shorts and flip-flops. When he visited recently, this time smartly dressed, everyone – from the staff at the front desk to the doctors and nurses – stopped to say hello. One woman rushed up and gave him a big hug. Another smiled and shouted, “Looking good, Barry!”

No disrespect there – just following company policy. In the early 90s, Barry asked everyone at the hospital to address their colleagues by their first names.

“One housekeeper walked up to me and asked, ‘Can I really call you Barry?’ I said she could. ‘Well,’ she replied, ‘I’ll just whisper it, because I don’t feel comfortable.’”

“We’re all on the same level,” Barry continues. “We just wear different hats. I happen to wear the president’s hat this year, but Rotarians all wear the Rotarian hat, and I have that hat, too. We’re all in this game together. We’ve all got to work together no matter what hat we wear.”

Words by Diana Schoberg
(Rotary Down Under)