John Germ served as Rotary International president in 2016-2017. Recognized in 2013 by the Obama White House as one of the Champions of Change, they stated:

John is an individual who truly embraces the Rotary motto of “Service Above Self.” As the vice chair of fund development for Rotary’s International PolioPlus Committee, he led Rotary’s US$200 Million Challenge, a fundraising effort in which Rotary raised more than $228 million toward a $355 million challenge grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Because Rotary reached the $200 million milestone ahead of schedule, the Gates Foundation awarded Rotary an additional $50 million.

The son of a stonemason, who built the family home with his own hands, excavating its foundation with a shovel and a wheelbarrow, Germ developed his work ethic early in life. Nothing came easily. Other schoolboys made fun of his name – “they called me ‘Bacteria’” – and his parents couldn’t afford college tuition. After a stint in vocational school, he paid his way through the University of Tennessee at Knoxville by working in a machine shop and serving food in a dorm cafeteria. After graduating, he joined the U.S. Air Force. Soon promoted to captain, he was navigator on a 50-ton Douglas C-124, ferrying troops and tanks to Vietnam.

In 1965 Germ’s C-124 carried the Gemini IV space capsule to Cape Kennedy. On another mission, the giant plane lost two engines and skimmed the ocean, shaking like a bumper car all the way back to base. “When we landed, we found seaweed hanging off the fuselage,” he says. “That’s how close we came to a watery grave.”

As president, Germ set out to “find the popcorn smell that’ll bring people to Rotary. And what is that? Service. We’ve got a service-minded generation coming up. We’ve got to get our message out to them, and we’d better do it fast.”

“Rotary has kept its light under a bushel for too long,” he says. “We need to do a better job of promoting our cause. That’s the challenge ahead, but I don’t see it as a problem. I don’t believe in problems – I believe in opportunities.”

I love this line from the Rotary magazine interview when John was selected to be president of Rotary. When asked, “Why the breakneck pace? “I don’t have hobbies,” he says. “Civic work is my recreation.”

John continues his engagement in Rotary and his passion to eradicate polio is evident whenever he speaks.

And he hasn’t slowed down.

Please welcome past RI President and current Vice Chair for PolioPlus, John Germ.