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Just before John Germ dropped by, Rick Youngblood took a deep breath. “You want to match his energy,” he says, “but he makes it hard to keep up.” Youngblood is the president and CEO of Blood Assurance, a regional blood bank in Chattanooga, Tenn., that Germ helped found in 1972. After his visit with Youngblood, Germ strode between mountains of empty bottles and cans at Chattanooga’s John F. Germ Recycling Center at Orange Grove, which he designed, before he drove to a construction site and popped a cork to dedicate a Miracle League field where special needs children will play baseball – all before zipping to the airport for a flight to Chicago and a cab ride to Rotary International World Headquarters, where he takes office as president of RI this month.

Why the breakneck pace? “I don’t have hobbies,” he says. “Civic work is my recreation.”

Not long ago Germ, 77, spent a raucous evening at the Chattanooga Convention Center, enjoying jokes at his expense. “John is a very influential person,” his friend Harry Fields announced from the podium. “I can’t tell you how many people emulate him … at Halloween. I mean, he’s the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. When it’s dark, he’s handsome!” Nobody laughed harder than the guest of honor at the celebration of his contributions, which was referred to as the “roast of John Germ.” The dinner raised more than $75,000 for Chattanooga State Community College. In closing, Fields noted Germ’s contribution to his community and the world: “100 percent of himself – and everyone else he can shake down!”

A legendary fundraiser, Germ led Rotary’s $200 Million Challenge, an effort sparked by a challenge grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Rotarians ultimately exceeded that number, raising $228.7 million to fight polio. He has already served Rotary as vice president and director, and The Rotary Foundation as vice chair and trustee. His contributions to the fight to eradicate polio led to his selection as one of 12 U.S. Rotarians honored at the White House in 2013 as a “Champion of Change” – someone who has improved communities around the world. As president, Germ chose three simple, no-nonsense words to be the theme of his year: *Rotary Serving Humanity*.

“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.”

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. “Unfortunately,” he says, “we flew home with soldiers’ bodies.” 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.”

When Germ’s military service ended, he joined engineering firm Campbell & Associates in his hometown. His boss, George Campbell, liked the young flier’s can-do attitude. “Within 10 years,” Germ told him, “I’ll either own some of this company or I’ll be your biggest competitor.” He wasn’t wrong. He eventually became chairman and CEO of the firm, which went on to serve Chattanooga’s airport, its most prominent hospital, several downtown high-rises, and the Convention Center. One of his challenges was a new cineplex, where the owner gave him a warning that puzzled him at first: “Don’t make the air conditioning too good.”

Germ asked, “Why not?”

“Because the customers need to smell the popcorn; we make most of our money at the concession stand.”

As president, Germ wants 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.”

Part of that message, he says, is that polio hasn’t been eradicated yet. We may be “this close,” but there were still 74 cases worldwide last year (all in Pakistan and Afghanistan). His own father was struck with the disease as an adult. “We were on a fishing trip when my brother said, ‘Daddy can’t walk,’” Germ recalls. “We carried him back to the car. Doctors said he’d never stand up again, but he did exercises. He tied an iron weight to his leg and tried to lift it. Little by little he got to where he could lift that weight and wave it around. He walked with a limp after that, but he walked.” Germ thinks he inherited a little of his father’s stubbornness. “I don’t give up easily either,” he says.

He’s certainly not giving up on supporting polio eradication – and he’s calling on Rotarians to follow his lead by urging every Rotary club to give at least $2,650 to fight polio during his term, which is also The Rotary Foundation’s centennial year. The number commemorates the first donation – of $26.50, made by the Rotary Club of Kansas City, Mo., in 1917 – to the Foundation. During the 2017 Rotary International Convention, a birthday celebration is also planned for Arch Klumph with tickets costing $26.50. If that all sounds a little gimmicky, fine. “If we can get people to pay attention,” Germ says, “they’ll see that Rotary is doing great things in the world.”

While preparing for his presidential term, he stayed in touch with friends and allies – often from the nerve center of his world, a maroon leather La-Z-Boy recliner in his comfortable home on the Tennessee River. He designed the house himself. He hangs corncobs on the poplars out back to feed the squirrels that run around his porch. His desk holds a photo of Germ dressed as Elvis Presley, entertaining at a district conference, and a plaque his wife brought home from the local Hobby Lobby. The plaque reads, “Integrity is doing the right thing when no one else is watching.” “It made me think of John,” says Judy Germ.

Since her husband of 57 years became president-elect last fall, “Rotary has consumed our lives,” she says. “In a good way.”

His presidency marks the apex of a life devoted to service. Previously active in the Jaycees, Germ joined the Rotary Club of Chattanooga in 1976. A natural leader and inveterate schmoozer, he has set fundraising records for Rotary and other organizations. The Blood Assurance program grew from a single blood draw into a regional network that supplies over 70 health centers in the Southeast with more than 100,000 units a year. It began when the United Way sent three doctors to the Chattanooga Jaycees to seek help with a blood shortage, recalls Germ’s friend and co-founder of Blood Assurance, Dan Johnson. “John was the Jaycees president and I was treasurer, so I got to watch him in action,” Johnson says. “When he goes to work, he never looks back. From nothing, we grew to our current budget of $29 million.” With help from Germ, Johnson, and others, Blood Assurance got its message out: Donating a pint of blood is a painless way to spend 30 minutes and save three lives.

“We owe much of our success to John Germ,” says Youngblood. “To me, he epitomizes three aspects of leadership: He’s a gentleman at all times, he’s compassionate to all people, and he’s an achiever. If John can’t get something done, it probably can’t be done.”

According to Fields, Germ’s success as a fundraiser comes from his out-of-the-box thinking. “Go back to the ’90s, when he was district governor. People thought of him as Mr. Chattanooga. We bought a barrel of Jack Daniel’s whiskey in honor of [well-known Tennessee Rotarian] Bill Sergeant. A barrel is 266 bottles’ worth, so we gave one bottle from that barrel to anyone who donated $1,000, and we raised $250,000.” The two men have often tended bar for charity, wearing matching aprons marked “Bar” and “Tender.” “My friend John is my greatest hero,” says Fields.

At the recycling plant Germ converted from a run-down dairy in 1989, adults with developmental disabilities sort tons of recyclables into great stacks of bottles and cans. “He has been involved in every bit of what happens here, from engineering the building to helping us negotiate contracts with the city,” says Tera Roberts, director of adult services for the center. Few of the employees would have a job if not for the recycling center, and they can keep anything interesting they come across. One worker found a crumpled $100 bill.

To finance the city’s new Miracle League field, one of the best-equipped in the country, Germ enlisted co-sponsors including Berkshire Hathaway, BlueCross BlueShield, and his own Rotary Club of Chattanooga. “Every kid should be able to play sports,” he says. “It’s not just for the child, but the whole family. What’s better than a child hearing his mom and dad cheer when he plays?” Another of his causes, the First in the Family program at Chattanooga State, provides scholarships for students who couldn’t attend college otherwise. Flora Tydings, the school’s president, calls Germ “an excellent role model to many of our students who, like him, are the first in their family to attend college.”

Today his schedule changes daily – sometimes hourly – as he keeps up with the duties of his new office. On his agenda, he says he would like to see Rotary operate more like a business. “We’ve been getting leaner, and I’d like to speed that up. In January, for instance, we’re going to hold our Board meeting in Chicago instead of San Diego. That means we won’t have to fly a couple dozen staff members to San Diego and put them up there. It’s just common sense.” He wants to shorten Board meetings, shrink some RI committees, and save money on committee meetings to make Rotary more cost-effective.

Half a century after landing his last C-124, Germ sees himself as Rotary’s navigator, plotting a course toward a bright future. “It’s going to be a team effort,” he says. His main target after polio will be Rotary’s static membership. On that issue, he says, “The fault is with us, the current Rotarians.” He wants members to “step up their outreach. I really think one of our main problems is that we don’t ask enough people to join. Why? For fear of rejection. We need to get over that – to get out there and bring in new members we’ll be proud of.”

To appeal to younger members, he supports a new move (approved at the Council on Legislation in April) that allows membership in Rotaract and Rotary at the same time. “I’m all in favor of that,” he says.

It doesn’t stop there. Germ supports flexibility in many Rotary matters. “Our clubs have always been organized around a meal. Lunch and dinner were part of our dues, and that system served us well. But society has changed,” he says. Rotary International is catching up by allowing clubs more leeway in when and how they meet. “How do we accommodate the 30-year-old businessperson raising a family? Well, for one thing, we could pay less attention to attendance,” he adds. “My question isn’t ‘How many meetings did you make?’ It’s ‘How are you making a difference in your community?' "

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By Kevin Cook

*The Rotarian*

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