As Rotarians we have all heard examples of how one Rotarian can have an idea and with the help of others can make a change happen. You can call it “The Power of One” and each of us has that potential, whether we change the life of one person in need or the lives of many.

I am about to share a story about my husband of 46 years who passed away 7 ½ years ago, Mike Harris. He was a Rotarian first as a charter member of the Tucson Rincon Club in 1968 and when he changed jobs and became the CEO of Tucson General Hospital, he left the Rincon Club as was required at that time by Rotary International to belong to the Rotary Club geographically to where you worked, so he became a charter member of the Tucson Casas Adobes Club in 1976. He was president-elect of that Club when he was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer in February 2011.

Mike was not a cyclist, he was a golfer. But in 2009, when the Gates Foundation made their polio challenge match to Rotary to raise $100M and all Rotary clubs were encouraged to hold fundraising events to raise those funds..... Mike was concerned for our smaller Rotary clubs being able to raise the monies needed and thought if Rotary/Polio Plus could be one of the beneficiaries of the El Tour de Tucson, then individual clubs could sponsor riders and not have to worry about planning and putting on their own special events to raise polio plus funds.
He, of course like many of us, remembered growing up and in the summer not being able to go swimming in a cold lake for fear of being stricken with polio.

He contacted D5500 leadership with the idea, but there was no District interest. But being the persistent person that he was and believing this was a great idea, Mike called Richard DeBernardis, the president of El Tour, in the spring of that year to inquire about the possibility of Rotary/PP being a beneficiary. He was told that the number of beneficiary organizations, which was then 12, was full and there was a long waiting list. But Richard would put Rotary/Polio Plus on the list for when there was an opening. Mike would call Richard every couple of weeks, possibly oftener, inquiring if one of the current organizations had dropped out - so Rotary could take their place. This went on all summer and finally, in September, Richard said there was a spot available. Mike put together a committee of Rotarians from various local clubs. With just two months until the ride, the committee met around our dining room table and decided for the first year the focus was to get as many riders as possible to have visibility and a presence, to demonstrate Rotary’s interest so another group would not get the spot promised to Rotary and to also get people interested. Mark Grady, the treasurer of the Casas Adobes Club, registered the Rotary riders and collected donations; and others promoted the ride locally in their clubs.
That first year, with just two months preparation, there were several dozen riders and tracking donations was a challenge as all donation did not go through Mark as planned. Some thought $5,000 was raised that year, others believed possibly closer to $20,000.

After that first year, I remember Mike commenting to me that once polio was conquered that Rotary would still have a spot in the El Tour ride and be able to ride for water, conflict resolution or whatever the next primary worldwide goal would be. So after we conquer polio, Rotarians should not hang up their bikes in their garages as we will need to keep riding.

In 2010, the committee was composed of six individuals from six different local Rotary Clubs, Mike continued as chair, the committee continued to meet at our dining room table, Mark Grady continued to take the Rotary registrations and donations, Gary Hirsch of the Tucson Club volunteered to represent Rotary at the El Tour meetings, Mike asked then District Governor, Ernie Montagne, a non-cyclist up to that time, if this could be a District event and Ernie said enthusiastically “yes”! Rotary “Ride to End Polio” jerseys were designed and made by Tucson Rotarian, Matt Blair. The Rotary Fellowship of Cycling was contacted. A huge billboard type banner was made and we took the show on the road with the banner, pins from the Tucson Convention and Visitors Bureau, free El Tour posters and with several other Rotarians we manned a booth in Montreal at the Rotary International Convention House of Hospitality.
Mike and I were invited by the Perimeter Bicycling Association to attend a national cyclist convention in Las Vegas where we volunteered in their booth passing out posters and wearing our Rotary shirts where we met some Rotarians who were serious cyclists. Mike also made presentations at Rotary club meetings around southern Arizona and at several District Assemblies. That year the Gates Foundation decided to stay on course with the ‘battle’ and pledged an additional $50M. Gary and Linda Rumack from the Rincon and Pantano Clubs took some incredibly wonderful pictures of our riders on their bikes wearing their Rotary Ride jerseys at Saguaro National Monument East.

In 2009, 1,604 polio cases had been reported and in 2010 the number was less than half that number at 789.

There were riders from at least 16 different Rotary Clubs, that 2nd year, totaling some 90 riders – including top money raiser Bob McKenzie from the Rotary Club of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Again it was hard to accurately track donations, but local Rotarians raised over $25,000 and Bob and others brought that total to over $40,000.

At the follow up meeting that December, it was learned that one of the Rumack photos submitted to The Rotarian Magazine, caught their eye and an article was promised for the 2011 ride. The committee decided unanimously that the focus should be fundraising now.
The chairmanship was passed on to Gary Hirsch. Past District Governor Ernie Montagne learned John Hewko was an avid bike rider, so Ernie introduced himself to John at the RI Convention that year and John subsequently rode in the 2012 ride and was the El Tour Dedication Recipient the following year in 2013 having raised the most money by a single person in the history of the El Tour and continues to promote, raise significant funds and joins the ride every year since. The total raised to date, through this ride alone, has been quoted most recently at $50 million including the Gates Match. And we all know the decrease in the numbers of polio cases reported, now in only two endemic countries.

It has been simply awesome to see the torch of The Ride to End Polio continue to burn and to get bigger and brighter with so many Rotarians stepping up to make it happen each year. And I know Mike would be so proud and grateful for all who continue to provide leadership for the Ride, for their passion to conquer polio, and for their passion for cycling for a cause.

I share with you one of Mike’s favorite quotes: “When there is no challenge in the fight, there is no glory in the triumph” When Mike was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer in 2011, our oldest son, Chris, had bracelets made with that quote for family and friends to wear and hundreds were given away.

I brought some this evening to share with any of you who would want to have one. Possibly it will help you finish your ride on Saturday or overcome some challenge of adversity in
the future. They will be a few on the registration table as you leave this evening.

In closing, remember the Power of One. Remember that each of us possess that quality and can make things happen. I hope each of you join me in making the commitment to take that power and to make dreams real.

Thank you!