

**Valparaiso Rotary Club – Thanksgiving meeting  
Monday, November 23, 2009**

Thank you so much for that wonderful introduction, John [Wolf].

And thanks to you and to the Rotary Club of Valparaiso for inviting me to speak with all of you today at this Thanksgiving gathering. Where has the year gone? It just seems like yesterday that the ball dropped in Times Square and here we sit with the holiday season upon us once again. The year may have gone by quickly and been filled with unprecedented challenges, but it has also been a year filled with many blessings. And we have much, perhaps more, to be thankful for.

The Pilgrims understood this in the fall of 1621. A year earlier, they arrived in the New World seeking religious freedom. They endured a bitter winter for which they were largely unprepared. Nearly half of the settlers were dead and, thanks in no small measure to the assistance of the indigenous people of the area, the remaining settlers survived. After their first full summer of farming, an abundant harvest was collected and there was now hope of surviving a second bitter Massachusetts winter.

So they paused to give thanks to God and to one another. A meal of corn, boiled pumpkin, venison, and wild fowl followed. And the Pilgrims invited the native people to join them in Thanksgiving, because they were grateful for the help.

This Thanksgiving we gather in the midst of a very lean period in our nation's economy and its value system. And while our silos may overflow with an abundant harvest from Indiana's fertile fields, we do not carry that sense of abundance and security that the Pilgrims did when they sat at the Thanksgiving table nearly 400 years ago.

Yet, we gather this week. We enjoy the good company of friends and family. We eat the food of a plentiful harvest. And we offer thanksgiving prayers and praise.

Why? Because we know that we have been given precious gifts from our Creator. The gifts of life, of health, of good food to eat, clean water to drink, and a safe community and country to live in and to raise our families. We have good health care, visionary leaders, committed citizens, dedicated soldiers and police to protect us, and the ability to worship and speak freely. For all of this, and for even more, we give thanks.

Even as we nod our heads when we hear these words of thanks, all of us gathered in this room understand something more. Jesus captures the essence of it as quoted in Luke 12: 48: "To those whom much has been given, more is required."

Members of Rotary know and live this message. It's in Rotary's mission as a "volunteer organization of business and professional leaders who provide humanitarian service, and help to build goodwill and peace in the world".

It's in Valparaiso University's mission as we prepare graduates "to lead and to serve in both church and society."

And what better way to show, that in this season of Thanksgiving, we are thankful for those we love and for what we have, than by living a worthwhile life in service to others.

This afternoon, I'd like to take a few moments to reflect on how our community and our University live out our Thanksgiving praise each and every day through serving those in need.

According to our VU's Office of Volunteer programs, during the 2008-2009 academic year, nearly 1,530 students completed 45,531 hours of community service, encompassing a wide range of programs and causes. Valpo students raised \$127,480 for philanthropic causes for the year. About 40 VU organizations and athletics teams performed community service in that time span.

Rebuilding Together certainly comes to mind as one of the best examples of how Valparaiso University and the larger Valpo community live our mutual commitment to service. Rebuilding Together, which began as a partnership between VU and the city in 1990 under the name Christmas in April, is today the most extensive volunteer home rehabilitation undertaking in the United States, with affiliates in 865 communities spanning all 50 states. Rebuilding Together assists homeowners who have low incomes, and who may be older, have disabilities, or are struggling with finding the resources to raise children — and it is, of course, an effort that Rotary has supported in a significant way.

Valparaiso University's director of public relations, Dustin Wunderlich, is a board member of Rebuilding Together. He shared with me the story of Geneva Spencer, a woman in her 80s who lives on Evans Avenue. She isn't able to keep up her home's maintenance like she used to, and she's received help for several years from Valpo students, who this past April helped to fix her front porch and do yardwork. Geneva told Dustin that "The volunteers have been very nice to work with, and the young people who volunteer work so hard I call them the 'beavers.'

"I'm just so thankful that Rebuilding Together is in Valparaiso."

The College of Business Administration has worked with Opportunity Enterprises, which serves people facing unique challenges and needs, to help the organization improve measurement of its performance. Valpo's Business School has assisted OE's leaders in a number of ways to help achieve the nonprofit's mission.

And in turn, in the master's program in international commerce and policy, the University's Nonprofit Organizations course is taught by Opportunity Enterprises President and CEO Gary Mitchell.

Students in the course learn about how nonprofits function and get the chance to work side-by-side with OE employees and community volunteers. The students learn how the people with physical and mental challenges whom OE serves can develop as productive members of society.

Graduate student Jacob Sitati talks about how his learning experience in the Nonprofit Organizations course has international applications. Jacob is a native of Nairobi, Kenya studying at VU. He said that he's learned about strategic planning, budgeting, and real-life management of service nonprofits.

"This type of service can be replicated all over the world," Jacob said. "If I give these concepts to three organizations in Kenya, and my classmate from Nigeria does the same, then thanks to Valpo and OE, you've started a small, international service-based movement. That's relevance."

Jacob commutes to Valpo from Chicago, and is the founder of his own nonprofit there, Vision for Kenya, which seeks to provide medical equipment and supplies for medical centers in the countryside and marginalized areas in Kenya. "I'm applying what I'm learning [at Valpo] directly to affect people in Kenya," he said.

And of the opportunity to meet OE's clients, Jacob said, "They come up to you and they greet you. They want to show you what they're doing. It makes you feel good.

"Talk about service in action."

VU students have volunteered and assisted at Valparaiso Community Schools, Hilltop Neighborhood House, Relay for Life, and Habitat for Humanity. Students have also participated in a number of service trips: restoring homes and building new housing in New Orleans and in Appalachia, and performing humanitarian work in Africa and Central America, among other contributions.

The University offers a course taught by English professor Martin Buinicki called Traditions of Giving and Serving in American life. This course, funded through a grant, will allow students to give \$10,000 to local nonprofits this spring. We expect this to be an annual Valpo experience to encourage student learning through philanthropy.

These are but a few examples of how Valparaiso University prepares students to lead and to serve.

As we all know, Rotarians are no strangers to leading and serving. Most recently, this area's Rotary district has been organizing an exchange program with Mexico focusing on the performing arts through Group Study Exchange, Rotary's intercultural education program for young professionals.

Rotary is well appreciated worldwide for its continuing efforts in the fight to eradicate polio. Last year three members from our club went to India to inoculate children with the polio vaccine.

Laura Harting, a Rotary member and executive director of the Visiting Nurse Association of Porter County, went on that trip with a group of 46 Rotarians from six different continents. After flying into Delhi, the participants gave immunizations in schools and toured the region, showing that Rotary offers international support for India's fight against polio. Laura got to see evidence of Rotary's giving spirit in action, including hospital facilities for those

afflicted with polio, and services for those with vision and hearing impairments. She saw how Rotarians from an ocean away can make a difference. “Everybody can do something,” Laura says.

“We worked alongside their health care workers and Rotarians,” she said. “You really got to get in and see how the people live. The children just melt your heart.”

Damien Gabis, founder and president of Taltree Arboretum and Gardens, went on the same trip.

“We were all strongly motivated by seeing the children in the Rotary promo videos, especially the kids that already had paralytic polio,” Damien said of the trip. He personally immunized 40 children under the age of 5, as did other participants. He said that one of the primary roles of those on the trip was to encourage and congratulate those in India who have made so much progress in working to eradicate polio.

“The mass of humanity living in slums and poverty was astounding to me,” Damien said. “In the Western world there are many people who do not appreciate how well off most Westerners are.”

Rotary strongly supports education. Rotary offers a number of education-related programs, such as Ambassadorial Scholarships for exchange programs, grants for university teachers, and World Peace Fellowships to train future diplomats and emerging leaders. Two Valparaiso University graduates have recently taken advantage of Ambassadorial Scholarships to pursue graduate studies.

Our local Rotary has provided money for a little league field, helped with highway cleanup, participated in the Christmas for Kids gift program with the Salvation Army, hosted a world affairs conference for high school students, and helped to sponsor a district high school speech competition each year.

Earlier this month, at the Rotary’s annual Veterans Day event, the guest speaker, Tuskegee Airman Quentin Smith, offered a living example of selfless service to our nation and to our community.

Valparaiso Rotary provided more than \$6,500 in scholarships to vocational students and will award \$11,000 this year in grants to nonprofits in the greater Valparaiso area.

Another fine example of the University and the community coming together to offer service is a program new to our region called Nexus — Connecting Youth to Opportunity.

Nexus is an eight-week program providing intensive mentoring and ministry to young people who might otherwise lack the resources they need to succeed. The program is designed to inspire talented young people and encourage them to be leaders in their communities. Fourteen young people completed the inaugural year of Nexus in 2009. They ranged from eighth graders to seniors in high school.

Nexus is led by Derek Perkins, community pastor for Valparaiso First United Methodist Church, along with his wife Karyn Farrar-Perkins, and a number of other leaders from the University, the business community, nonprofits, and volunteers from all around.

Under the Nexus program, the young participants, who come from the Hilltop neighborhood, engaged in a number of enriching activities. They participated in weekday apprenticeships at participating area businesses in professional settings, and learned legal concepts at Valparaiso University School of Law's High School Law Institute.

Pastor Perkins said that the Nexus group felt welcome on campus, and that is a wonderful thing to hear. We in the Valparaiso University community want to forge those connections in the name of service. And we hope to continue to support and expand our efforts in serving others, into 2010 and beyond.

Those who came together to make all of these endeavors happen answered a call to serve. We can all be proud of what they've accomplished, as an example to all of us — that coming together and marshaling our resources, we can make a difference.

Out of gratitude, we are called to make a difference: To those whom much has been given, more is required.

Just as Rotary continues to support educating the leaders of tomorrow, we at Valparaiso University are hard at work with the same aims in mind. Our graduates will broaden the region's knowledge base and open up development and economic opportunities here, region-wide and far beyond.

More than that, through the foundation of an educational tradition rooted in faith, our graduates will continue to serve in their communities as a calling, for some, as a vocation. We are preparing our students to occupy chairs that you are seated in this day, only 20, 30, 50 years from today. Chairs of leadership in business, churches, government, charities, in education — leaders in service.

Martin Luther King Jr. said: "Everyone can be great, because anyone can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

This Thanksgiving, I would like to thank you, the members of Valparaiso's Rotary, for having "hearts full of grace" and "souls generated by love." Rotarians offer service in so many ways, only a few of which I've chronicled today.

So as we pause this week to reflect on our many blessings, let us be called anew to give the more that is required. May we renew our mutual pledge in the coming year to assist those in need. There is, indeed, no better way to show our gratitude.

God bless you, this Thanksgiving, and thank you for the opportunity to share a fine meal, good fellowship, and these few thoughts with you today.