

Rotarians deliver inspirational farewell to Seoul

The tens of thousands of Rotarians gathered in Korea for the biggest convention in Rotary International's history completed the five-day convention on Wednesday at the Korea International Exhibition Center in Goyang, Gyeonggi.

In their fourth and final general session before the closing ceremony, the volunteer leaders from some 160 countries heard from speakers living the organization's presidential theme this year, "Be a Gift to the World," including athletes, celebrities and people doing inspirational work.

Speakers such as Rosie Batty, Australian of the Year in 2015, and Lee Yang-hee, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, addressed the Rotarians on their work with children.

Rosie Batty is founder of the Luke Batty Foundation. Her son Luke was murdered by his father two years ago.

"Family violence happens to anyone and every one," Batty said. "I haven't stopped speaking [on the issue] since Luke was murdered.

"And my intention is to keep speaking until victims are no longer blamed and perpetrators of the violence are made accountable."

Instructing the audience that family violence is a "choice" made by husbands - and more often by husbands than wives, according to statistics - to use violence to exert power and control over their wives and children, Batty said gender inequality, where "women are seen as chattels or possessions and not equals [to men]," is the root cause of domestic violence committed by men.

UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar Lee Yang-hee drew the Rotarians' attention to the state of millions of children at risk of physical, psychological and environmental dangers throughout the world.

"The best form of gift to the world," Lee said, "is giving something for our children, not only because they are our future but more importantly, because they are the citizens of today with dignity and rights."

Lee asked countries and governments to do more.

"As many as 196 countries signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child," she said. "Yet 58 million children are still out of school globally, with only 2 percent of humanitarian aid worldwide going into education; 168 million children worldwide are engaged in child labor; and 171 million children in developing countries are stunted by malnutrition by the time they reach the age of five."

A sports panel including Paralympic gold medalist Michelle Stilwell talked to the Rotarians on their work "being a gift to the world."

"One thing we all share is adversity," said Stilwell, who was injured at age 17 and became

quadriplegic. She was a gold medalist in the 2000 Paralympic Games in Wheelchair Basketball and a world record-breaker in wheelchair racing. A Canadian, and an avid sports player from before her injury, Stilwell went from a novice wheelchair racer to world champion in just two years.

“[It makes a difference] how we choose to deal with that adversity and make it part of our life to propel forward, to use it as something to give back, to live a most passionate life, a most meaningful life,” she said.

The closing ceremony started with a performance by K-pop superstar Psy, who is one of many celebrities participating in Rotary’s public awareness campaign for polio eradication.

In their addresses, both incoming and outgoing presidents of Rotary International emphasized the polio eradication program, which became a public-private partnership in 1988.

Incoming President John Germ encouraged Rotarians to keep up their work on polio eradication.

“We have to keep up all of our efforts, not just for another few months, but for at least another three years,” he said. “And we can’t forget that we are still \$1.5 billion short of the money we’ll need to get the job done.

“It’s not our job to raise all of that money ourselves. But it is our job to advocate anywhere and everywhere we can, to make sure that it is raised.”

By wearing a Rotary pin, Germ said, Rotarians are taking the opportunity to “change lives.”

Rotary International’s outgoing president K.R. Ravindran shared with the audience a personal story.

“Fifty-three years ago, my mother’s life was perhaps the very first to be saved from polio by Rotarians,” Ravindran said. His mother came down with respiratory failure after contracting polio in 1963 and was miraculously saved when Rotarians were able to fly into Sri Lanka a ventilator, scarce in the country at the time.

“And tonight, I stand before you as her son, and your president, to say that soon - perhaps not in years, but in months, Rotary will give a gift that will endure forever: a world without polio.”

The Rotarians said good-bye to each other, promising another year of “Service above Self,” Rotary’s motto, before meeting in Atlanta next year.

“And as we say farewell to each other, knowing that our paths will cross again as He wills,” Ravindran said, “I send with you my trust, my confidence, my faith in you-for you are, and you will remain, a gift to me, as you are ‘A Gift to the World.’”