

Angel Sanz, Watkins-Montour Rotary Club Changeover Dinner

June 25, 2026

Hello everybody, thank you for being here. For those who don't know me, my name is Angel Sanz, and I want everyone to think about this. What's the scariest thing you've ever done? Myself, 8 months ago would have answered the fear of the unknown and experiencing new things. But now I'm living the life of an exchange student living in a different country where everything is completely different from home, and so this is my story of living a new life.

I was born in Mexico, in a small city called Boca del Río, on the very coast, on the Gulf of Mexico. A place with warm weather and a definition of winter very different from Odessa.

Before I continue with my speech, I want to thank Rotary International, to all the members of my club Watkins-Montour Rotary Club, as well District 7120. To my teachers, to my host families and my friends, I want to thank them for always being supportive of me and making me feel included in this amazing community. For being there any moment I needed them and for letting me call them friends.

I still remember when I first arrived here. I was honestly in shock that I was living in a different country. Everything felt so strange, the place, the people, even the small everyday things. It's hard at first, getting used to a new life where you don't know anything or anyone.

But the people I mentioned made that feeling disappear faster than I expected. Everyone was so eager to see me. It didn't take long before this place started to feel less like somewhere new and more like somewhere I belonged.

Especially the soccer team.

I met them before school even started, a couple days after my arrival. I was terrified because they were going to be the first group of people that I will meet. But, despite all of that, they were probably the happiest to have me there. They were so energetic, as if I had known them for years. I still remember one of my first interactions with them. I was greeting everyone when, in an instant, everyone, at the same time, screamed "Ball!" I turned around, and then BOOM, a soccer ball flew straight into my face.

It was unexpected, a little painful, but full of energy and laughs. It was a very direct way to say hello. And I wouldn't change it for anything. When I blinked, I didn't have time to look back because they showed me the light at the end of the tunnel; they made me feel at home. And that moment is when I felt confident and happy to be here.

I think that moment says a lot about how this experience has changed me in less than 3 months.

Because if you told the version of me from 8 months ago that I would get hit in the face with a soccer ball in a different country and still decide to stay, laugh, and come back the next day, I probably would've said, "Yeah, I'll stay home."

But that's the magic of stepping into the unknown: you never know what's next, where you're going next, or how much you are going to change.

Then there was the next challenge of my exchange: choosing between joining the basketball team, where I already knew people, and the swimming team, where I barely knew anyone and had no real experience.

So naturally, I chose the hardest option. And I joined the swimming team.

The first couple weeks of swimming were the toughest ones of my exchange so far.

I felt alone because I didn't know anyone. Everyone had been swimming together for years. They were really close, like a family. And I felt like I didn't belong.

And the water. Every stroke felt like I was going backwards. My lungs burned every time I tried to breathe, and my muscles hurt so much I questioned every life decision that led me there.

I wanted to be good, but everyone was at a different level. It made me want to quit.

In those moments, when everything felt too much, my mind fell into doubt and negativity. I realized something about myself. I'm not the strongest swimmer, I'm not the fastest, and I wasn't the most experienced. I was thinking, "I'm nothing but average." And that thought almost made me give up.

But something changed.

The day I was going to quit, we had a meet against a strong school. Everyone assumed it was an easy win for the opponents. And in my mind it was going to be my last time on the team.

I had only one event in the first half. When it was my turn, I felt like I was standing at the bottom of an endless mountain I could never climb. Those feelings of being mediocre and negativity. I did worse than ever in my event, and I felt hopeless.

The coach saw that everyone was having a rough time, so at halftime, he called the whole team to a small room, where the only voice I could hear was his. He started to give a speech, and he said a single line that will stick with me forever.

“If you have time to think you are not good enough, do you really have time to give up?”

And the answer was clear. No. We can't afford to have our heads down. That mountain might seem tall, but it's a reason to start looking up and climb it. Nobody said it was going to be easy, but nothing is stopping you from taking the next step, those steps that everyone in the room had to take. There are people I might not be able to beat, and honestly, it's natural to look at them and think they are awesome. But thinking they are good for no reason is rude.

Being average isn't a reason to quit. It's a reason to keep going.

I found my reason to be in the pool, and it was because I wanted to. Even when my lungs were burning. Even when my arms felt like they couldn't move anymore. The only thing for me to do is look up and keep swimming.

In the second half. It was my turn. I dove into the water. When I looked up to see my results, I saw I had made a new personal record. I was excited, but then I looked at the bench where my teammates were. My teammates were shouting, cheering, and celebrating as if I had just won something much bigger. Their voices cracking, jumping, calling my name.

Something even more important changed, the people. The swimming team, they didn't leave me behind. They encouraged me. They joked with me. They pushed me to keep going even when I didn't believe in myself.

That was the moment I enjoyed swimming; it's not about who is the best one, it's about swimming in the same pool with my friends, cheering them, celebrating with them, sharing victories, and creating connections that will last for a lifetime.

The soccer team made me feel the warmth of a home, but the swimming team became something more, they made me feel the warmth of a family. A family that supported me when I struggled, that celebrated small victories with me, and that never made me feel like I was alone. That's when it really hit me how much I had changed.

The swimming team didn't just help me become a better swimmer. They changed my life for the better.

You never know what will happen when you step into the unknown. So if there's one thing I've learned, it's not to run away from the unknown. Because sometimes, the thing that scares you the most ends up becoming the thing that changes you the most.

For me, it was painful at first, but what I've got from it is something I could never have imagined. I wished for. And I wouldn't change it. I encourage you to try what you've always wanted to do. That way, I found a version of myself I didn't know existed.

When I go back to Mexico, I'll carry these moments with me. When I listen to that song, I will remember those late-night drives with my friends, when I'm in the pool, I will remember those memories I made with the swimming team, and a very fast reaction time whenever someone screams "Ball!"

Last year, I needed a change of pace. I can't believe how much I've changed and grown. This year. Though I'm far from home. With Rotary, I'm not alone.

Thank you.