

ENTRUSTING ROTARY



BY TIFFANY WOODS

UNIQUE CALIFORNIA COUPLE SETS UP \$1 MILLION TRUST FOR THE ROTARY FOUNDATION

COFFEE CUPS IN HAND, Rotarians Al and Ruth Braswell start their Southern California morning sitting in their gazebo on a ridge, looking out at the valley below and the sage-brush-covered, hazy hills around them. Al fishes nuts, his prelude to breakfast, out of a canister and flicks their empty shells over the edge of the gazebo. The air is still. A bird lands on an agave plant. A road-runner darts into a bush. It's quiet and peaceful on the couple's private, 213-acre, hillside estate in Yucaipa, where the previous night, a bobcat paid them a visit. Next to their gazebo is their 6,500-square-foot home, which is made out of three connected monolithic domes and, according to Al, is worth \$2.25 million.

But don't let the setting fool you. Although they're multimillionaires, the Braswells aren't living large, Hollywood-bling style. Some might even call them frugal. Their home, which cost \$300,000 to build, is furnished with secondhand items, including a water bed from a yard sale, \$25 chandeliers, and a \$5 wall hanging of a flamenco dancer (Al brought the seller down from \$10). They drive two Mercedes-Benzes, but Al bought them at auctions. He brushes his teeth with half a cup of water, buys his clothes at thrift shops, rarely uses the dishwasher, and still has shirts that he bought 30 or 40 years ago.

It's not just about frugality, though. For Al, a child of the Great Depression and a retired science professor, it's also about recycling,

reducing, and reusing: the three Rs of environmental conservation. This economical-environmental approach to life – plus some smart investments – has meant that the Braswells have money in the bank to spend elsewhere. “Instead of spending it on new automobiles, why, I've got it for something else,” Al says.

Like The Rotary Foundation. They've established a trust committing \$1 million to it. “I can't think of a better place I'd rather it go,” Ruth says.

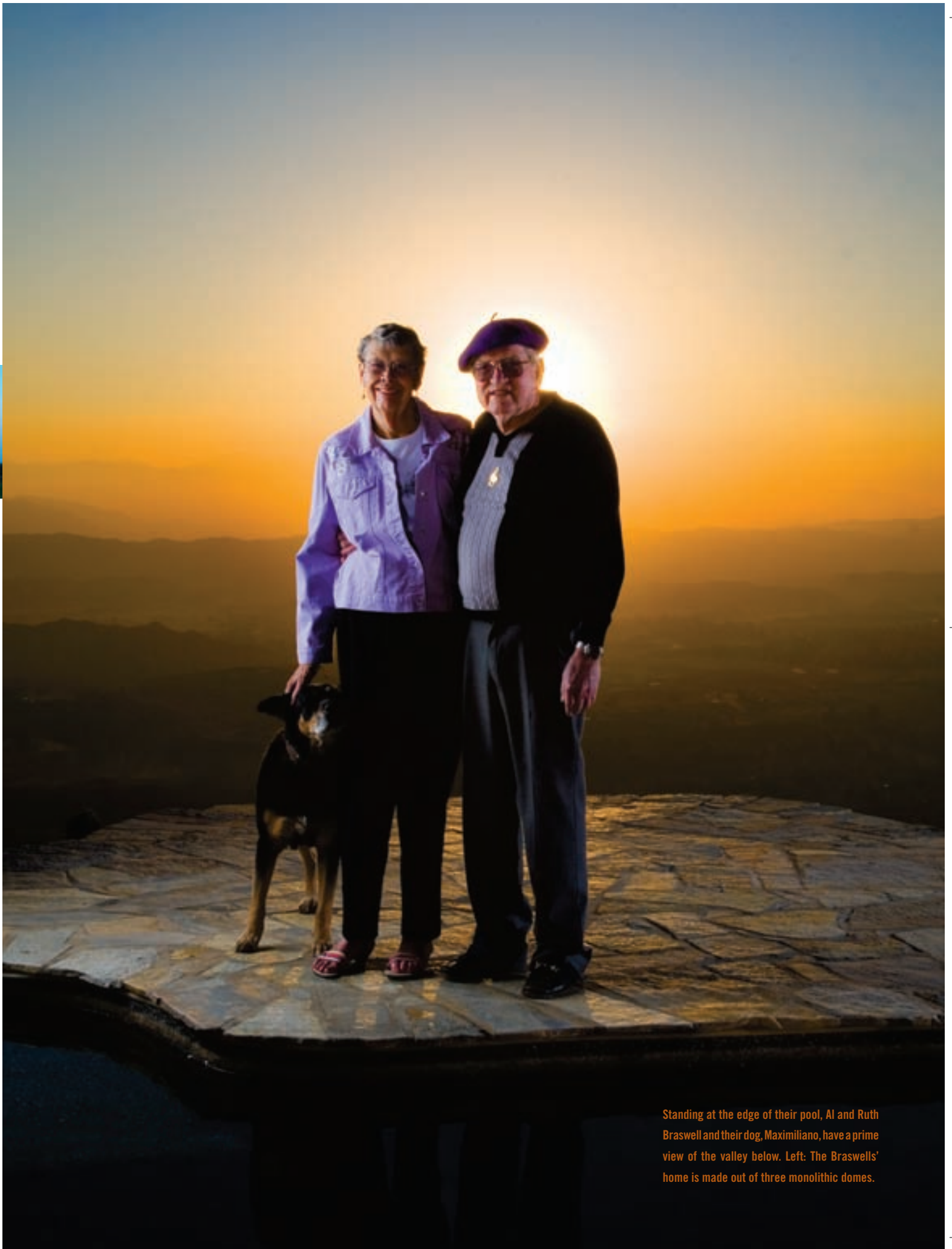
MORE THAN A MILLION

The Braswells, who were both born in 1929, are one of 50 couples or individuals who've openly committed to leaving the Foundation at least \$1 million in their trusts or wills. An additional 36 couples or individuals have each given at least \$1 million to the Foundation as an outright donation.

The Braswells' million-dollar gift will go to the Foundation's Permanent Fund, which finances humanitarian projects, scholarships, and Group Study Exchanges. The principal will never be spent. The interest will go to the Braswells' district, 5330, and the World Fund, which finances the Foundation's programs.

Their generosity goes beyond their \$1 million commitment. Since 2003, they've been giving to the Annual Programs Fund, which also

RIGHT: ALUCE HENSON/ROTARY IMAGES; LEFT: COURTESY OF MONOLITHIC DOME INSTITUTE



Standing at the edge of their pool, Al and Ruth Braswell and their dog, Maximiliano, have a prime view of the valley below. Left: The Braswells' home is made out of three monolithic domes.

finances the Foundation's programs. Al usually gives at least \$10,000 a year, and Ruth tends to donate between \$10,000 and \$25,000 a year. In 2002, they each gave \$10,000 to the Foundation's PolioPlus program for polio eradication efforts. As of December, their combined cash contributions to the Foundation totaled nearly \$155,000.

The Braswells don't just write checks, though. They're active Rotarians. Ruth, who is a member of the California Commission on Aging, joined the Rotary Club of Jurupa in the late 1980s after a man at a political fundraiser dinner invited her into the club, which she served as president in 1992-93. Al joined the Rotary Club of Yucaipa in 1992. "It made business sense," explains Al, who says he was already doing the work of a Rotarian but without the title. Ruth later joined Al's club because it was closer.

Although the couple owns and operates facilities for the elderly, mentally ill, and mentally retarded, Al explains that he and Ruth gained most of their wealth through real estate and stocks.

In addition to giving to the Foundation, the Braswells have set up college scholarship funds and donate to other causes, including cancer research. Ruth has undergone chemotherapy for lung cancer, and Al has been treated for prostate cancer. "I feel fortunate because I was supposed to be dead in July 2005," Ruth says. "I wake up every day and thank God I'm alive."

As Rotarians, they've participated in polio vaccination efforts in India, helped set up a dental clinic and a pharmaceutical dispensary in Mexico, and done construction work in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi, USA. They've hosted a barbecue for Inter-

now they're back at what they call their "Vista Dhome." Al, one of his brothers, and his son built the beige dome home because Al likes the openness and circularity of domes and because, he says, they cost less than traditional homes to heat and cool. The three-bedroom, four-bathroom dwelling is a seamless shell constructed out of steel rebar and sprayed-on concrete, foam, and stucco. The estate includes a saltwater swimming pool shadowed by cascading boulders made from foam. "It's less maintenance for keeping the algae growth down," Al says of the salt water.

Being inside it is like being inside a giant egg with a light peach interior and teal carpet. Rooms are named after four surrounding mountains. Guest bedrooms are formed from wall partitions and sliding doors that lead to the gravel yard. Curtains aren't necessary because there are no neighbors – except, of course, for a few wild ones. One screen door has a repaired hole in it from a curious bear that not only clawed the screen but also pulled meat out of the freezer in the garage.

A staircase Al bought at an auction for \$200 spirals up to a balcony, where the black metal railing is dotted with musical notes and the words *Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam*. (Al is a singer. He and his brothers, who live within 20 minutes of his house, sing in a barbershop quartet on Monday nights.)

A second spiral staircase leads to the "sky lounge," a circular bar capped by a glass geodesic dome, made up of triangular sections, that Al says he got from "a hippie in England." Sitting in wine-barrel chairs around the bar gives the feeling of being in



“THEY ARE PROBABLY TWO OF THE MOST GENEROUS, DOWN-TO-EARTH, BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE I’VE EVER MET.”

actors at their home and handed out dictionaries to third graders as part of a club project. Every year, club members sell tickets to a fundraising event for college scholarships and charities in the community. Last year, the tickets sold for \$150, and Al sold about 50.

Regional Rotary Foundation Coordinator Joe LaGuess knows firsthand about the Braswells' generosity: He worked with their attorney on setting up the million-dollar gift. "They are probably two of the most generous, down-to-earth, beautiful people I've ever met," LaGuess says. "They are just so very caring. What is unique and refreshing about them is their genuineness. They don't like pretenses."

DOMES SWEET DOMES

It doesn't get much less pretentious than this. Al and Ruth have just stopped at Johnnie's Broasted Chicken for some takeout, and

the control deck of a spaceship with a 360-degree view of the land and sky.

Indeed, Al feels like the captain of his own life. "I know how I got here," he says. "I worked 16 hours a day, and I went to school."

FROM SACKS TO RICHES

Al is the oldest sibling of five boys and one girl. His mother was a housewife, and his dad was, in Al's words, "a fundamentalist, Bible-thumping, fire-and-brimstone preacher who built churches." The family moved from parish to parish. Al was born in Texas and spent part of his childhood in Oklahoma, where his family made its own soap out of hog fat and lye. Al's mother made his underwear out of flour sacks and sewed his Sunday suits from his dad's old pants.



The Braswells decorated their home themselves with items that include a staircase from an auction and secondhand chandeliers. Previous page: A glass-capped, geodesic “sky lounge” protrudes from the house’s shell.

Born in Michigan, Ruth grew up in a middle-class, Christian home, but it wasn't a fundamentalist household like Al's. Her parents were music professors. She met Al in first grade in Bethany, Okla., but Al moved away while they were still in grade school. Ruth later moved with her family to Pasadena, Calif. One day while Al was visiting his sister in college there, Ruth caught his eye at a tennis court. Al was attending graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles, at the time.

They've now been married for 56 years. "To the same person," Al adds. He says one reason they've stayed together so long is that they accept each other's differences. Sitting at the table, where Al is eating fried chicken, he and Ruth calmly discuss their contrasting personalities and beliefs.

"I'm much more introverted. He's much more extroverted," says Ruth, who's wearing earrings with the Rotary emblem on them.

Al is still wearing a name tag from a Rotary club meeting earlier that day identifying him as chair of his district's PolioPlus subcommittee.

True to form, Al approaches most things from a scientist's perspective. In 1958, he and Ruth moved to Oregon because he got a scholarship to study at Oregon State University. By then, their three

children had been born: Barry, Pamela, and Cheryl. Ruth taught seventh grade while Al got a second master's degree and then a doctorate in ecology.

They then moved to Utah, where Al taught at Utah State University, and Ruth worked on a doctorate in educational psychology but stopped short of gaining the degree. The family moved to Chile and later Venezuela, where Al trained science professors. When the family returned stateside, Al took a job teaching at the University of Maryland.

By this time, Al's father had retired from the ministry and was in Southern California overseeing care facilities for the elderly and mentally ill. The family moved to California to help. Al started as an orderly. Ruth began as an assistant activities director. The couple's children also worked in the family business.

Al believes people should work to obtain what they want. For example, he set up a scholarship at one of his alma maters, but the recipients have to work on campus to receive it. When his seven-year-old granddaughter comes to visit, he hires her to pick the pods off the climbing cat's-claw vegetation, which sprawls across his dome to keep it cool and help it blend in with the environment. He pays her a penny a pod to teach her the value of money. When the kids were growing up, he gave them a weekly allowance of a nickel times their age.

HUMAN SERVICES

Today, Al and Ruth own or operate nearly 20 facilities for people with Alzheimer's disease, mental retardation, mental illnesses, and dementia. The facilities range from 6 to 108 beds.

On a sunny afternoon in September, Al and Ruth stop by their 5-acre property in Riverside that houses a 49-bed Alzheimer's ward and a total of 172 beds in two facilities for mentally ill adults.

Al is hard to miss as he walks down the halls introducing himself. He wears white slacks, a white belt, white loafers, red socks, a red driver's cap, and a red shirt with a scalloped edge along the buttons. He has about 20 such shirts – all are in different colors.

"Sometimes he looks like he's going to play golf – he's got pastels on. But he's not going to play golf. That's just his outfit that day," says Marilyn Crampton, secretary of the Braswells' Yucaipa club, who explains that Al's unique style extends beyond his wardrobe. "He's a unique person. He marches to his own drummer. He speaks what he's thinking."



Maximiliano came from the pound but now has a life – and a view – that many dogs would envy.

Al says he prefers to make his money in "human services" because he likes seeing patients progress, such as the time a mentally ill man learned to live independently in a transitional home, took over the care of a flower bed, and then proudly showed it to his parents. These success stories, in part, motivate Al. Still, he is also concerned about the bottom line. Al explains it this way: "If I'm going down the highway, and there's a guy without any gas in his car, and if I don't have any gas in my car, I can't help him. I've got to have a full tank."

Al is more than happy to help those he finds along life's proverbial highway. He and Ruth decided to give to the Foundation because they like the work it does and how it manages its money. "We both believe in Rotary because we have seen it in action in different parts of the world, and we would much rather give our money to Rotary than to any government," Ruth says.

"I trust Rotary," Al says. ■

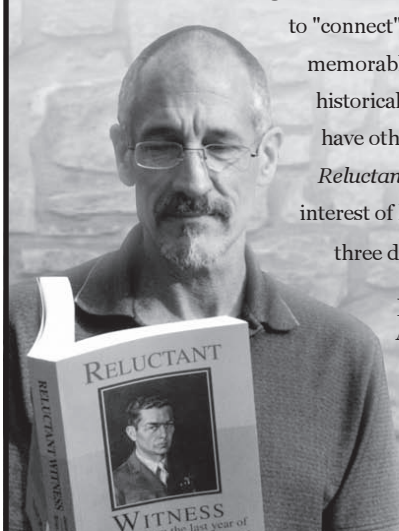
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