

Making the time to care and act

By Mary Welch

“I strongly believe in volunteering and giving back to the community,” says John Rice. “It is important for me to do it as an individual, a human being, and as a citizen of the business community. Obviously I don’t have the time to get involved in everything I would like to. But I do make sure to find the time to get very involved in a few issues and really try to make an impact.”

Rice isn’t kidding when he says he is busy. He is vice chairman of General Electric and president and CEO of GE Infrastructure. Rice commutes between GE Infrastructure’s offices in Atlanta, where he and his family live, and GE’s headquarters in Fairfield, Conn.

However, he is quite serious about lending his personal time and resources to make a difference in the community, most notably in the areas of education and economic development.

“We must have a thriving community, and I believe that one of the most effective uses of my volunteer time comes through the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce,” he says. Rice chaired the chamber’s board of directors in 2004 and its education policy committee in 2003.

“I think working through the chamber is the one of the most effective way to work with others in the community – business and civic leaders – to make change, working toward a better transportation system or improving education or working on critical issues such as Georgia’s water. And, of course, education is very, very important to me.”

Rice gets enthusiastic when talking about various initiatives and improvements he sees in education, particularly public education. “We have to move the needle in education, and we are,” he says. “The schools have a principal-for-a-day program, and I’ve actually gone in and done it,” he says. “It really is amazing and eye-opening to see what our school administrators and teachers deal with every day. They work very hard. We are seeing results.”

Rice, as well as GE, supports a number of initiatives for education. Recently the company gave a \$22 million grant to the Atlanta Public School system designed to improve student achievement in math and science. Rice, in particular, is a cheerleader for Teach for America, a program that brings recent college graduates into inner-city and lower-income schools for two years.

“It’s a great program and attracts a number of Ivy League graduates,” he says. “At GE, when we hire new college graduates, we will honor their commitment to Teach for America and allow them to begin their career with us when that commitment has been completed two years

later. And, when they come to work for us, they have such a different perspective than they would have coming straight out of college. In fact, a lot of them decide to stay in the schools and not even go to the corporate world. I hate to lose great talent, but if it’s going to help teach lower-income kids, it’s fine.”

Rice has also taken a leading role in fighting domestic violence and works closely with the Partnership Against Domestic Violence. He and his wife, Cammie, are the co-chairs of the annual Hearts with Hope gala Feb. 23 at the InterContinental Hotel in Buckhead. The goal is to raise \$500,000 to help battered women and their children.

“It’s not a cause or issue that I was very familiar with,” he admits. “I’ve never had any experience in it, didn’t know anyone who was a victim. The sad fact is that I probably did know women who were being abused, but they were afraid to come forward. One in three women is a victim. It’s unlikely that I don’t know someone who has been a victim.”

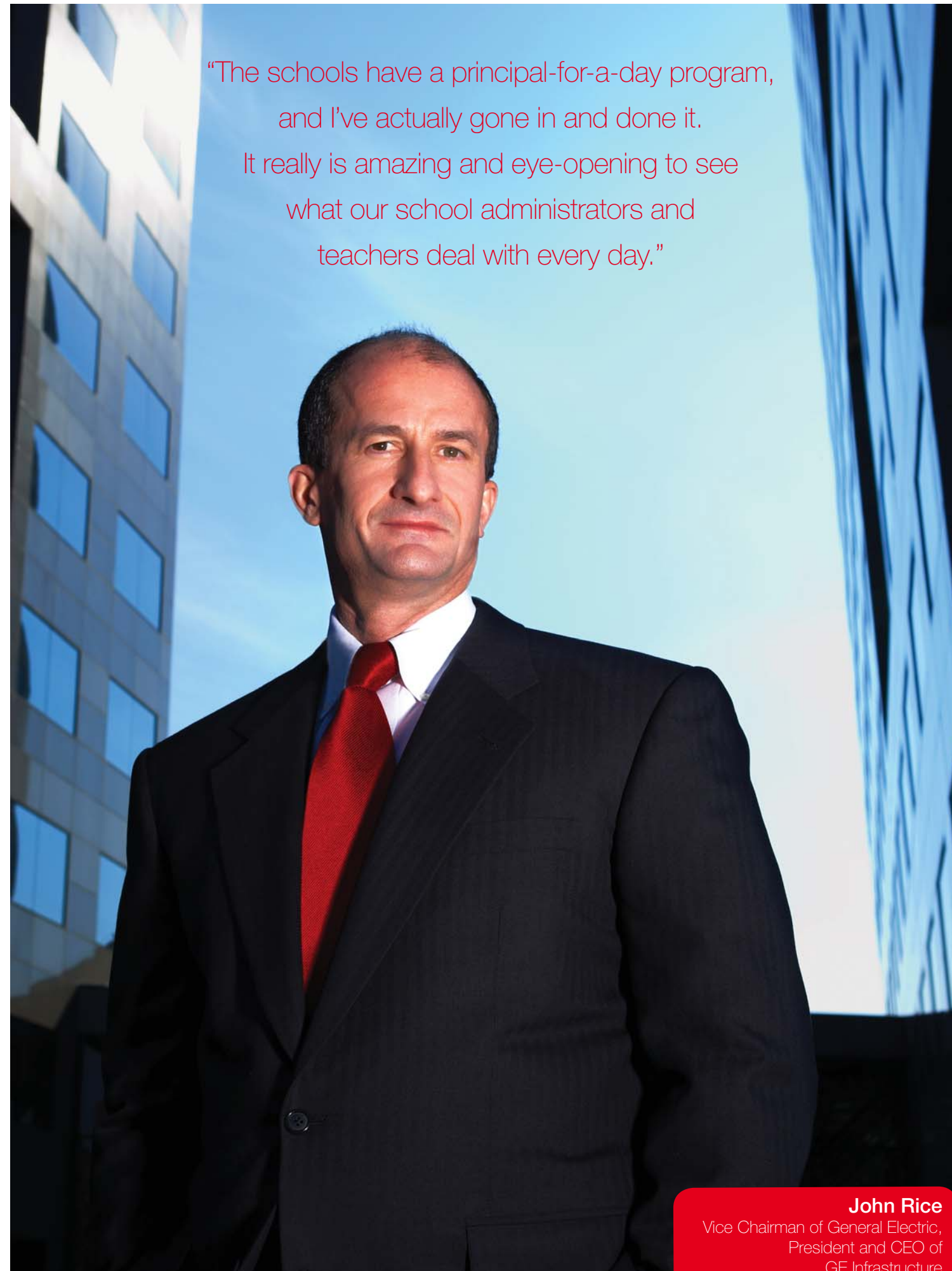
Rice’s wife and Jacqui Welch, a vice president at Rock-Tenn Corp., were involved in PADV, and Rice got drawn into the cause. “They kept talking about it. I would hear the statistics and the stories of women who escaped such horrible, horrible abuse. I couldn’t take it – hearing the stories and not getting involved. So I will do anything to create awareness and raise funds for women’s shelters, protection, education, legal services – whatever it takes. It is such an important cause, and one that men must support as well as women.”

Rice ventured into somewhat unfamiliar volunteer territory recently when he lent his support to PAWS, a no-kill shelter in DeKalb County. “Who doesn’t love dogs and cats and who doesn’t want to help them?” he asks. His long-time executive assistant asked him to be the honorary chairman. “How sad is it to have wonderful animals and no one to love them? I love dogs. I used to have a dog. I would love to have one, but I travel too much. But again, I think it’s a great cause, and I was glad to help.”

Helping frequently comes up in his speech. He believes deeply that he needs to give back to the community and does so willingly. He also wants to ensure that his children understand and practice the importance of giving back.

“It is important to me that they understand they have a responsibility to others,” he says. “It is not a burden; in fact, it’s a privilege. We’ll go down together and help out at a food kitchen or a homeless shelter, and again as young men I want them to be aware of the plight of others. I want them to care, and they do.”

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Photography by Joseph Wong

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