

Mia Farrow uses her star power to shine a light on the fight against polio

The Rotarian

Photos courtesy of UNICEF/Georgina Cranston (top) and UNICEF/Giacomo Pirozzi

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UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Farrow greets a girl at the Zam Zam camp for people displaced by the conflict in Darfur. Farrow visited Sudan to help raise awareness about the millions of people — most of them women and children — affected by the violence.



Farrow prepares to give the oral polio vaccine to a sleeping infant during National Immunization Days in Nigeria, aimed at reaching 40 million children throughout the country.

As the child of Hollywood director John Farrow and screen legend Maureen O’Sullivan, Maria “Mia” de Lourdes Villiers Farrow enjoyed an idyllic youth. But at her ninth birthday party, Farrow fell while playing and couldn’t get up. Doctors diagnosed polio, the scourge of the 1950s. She was hospitalized for eight months, her childhood coming to a screeching halt. “[Author] Susan Sontag said we all carry two passports: one for the land of the well, one for the land of the ill,” Farrow recently noted. “Any minute, the passport for the land of the well can be revoked, and you’re in another land entirely.”

Her own hospital confinement changed her life profoundly. Ever since, she has been drawn to humanitarian causes. In September 2000, she was appointed as a UNICEF goodwill ambassador and has traveled on humanitarian missions to Angola, Botswana, Nigeria,

South Africa, and Sudan. “My primary goal is to absorb what I can and then tell the world what’s going on, hoping that more people will step up and help,” Farrow says. “When I speak out, I feel I’m giving silent, suffering souls a voice.”

She recently sat down with Editor in Chief Vince Aversano at UNICEF’s New York City office.

You’ve been involved in humanitarian work for many years, most notably in your association with UNICEF. How did that association start?

I was appointed a goodwill ambassador in 2000 at the first Global Polio Partners Summit, a meeting that brought together the leading figures supporting the polio eradication effort. I gave a speech and said that I felt a moral obligation to be there on behalf of all children stricken with polio because I had polio as a child, and my 12-year-old son, Thaddeus, contracted polio when he lived in an orphanage in India.

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How did you first become aware of Rotary?

Before my involvement with UNICEF, I was only aware of Rotary in the vaguest sense. In the furthest treasures of my imagination, it was a secret club — I wasn't sure. But I was aware that good works were being done. In our subsequent partnership on the polio initiative, I became very aware of what Rotary was about, and I am extremely grateful and proud to be part of such an impressive alliance.

What was your first full-fledged involvement with Rotarians in the field?

I met my first Rotarian on a United Nations mission to Nigeria in 2001 to help on a National Immunization Day. It was actually several days during which 40 million children were immunized against polio. I had my son Ronan along; it was quite an experience for him.

How did that mission affect you?

It was eye opening. I toured UNICEF-supported health and educational programs in four towns. I saw how the whole chain works to reach every child — down rivers, up mountains, traveling by camel and canoe to get them immunized. It was uplifting to see the cooperation between Rotarians, WHO, and the civilian population. I saw volunteers and scoutmasters and teachers and police all joining forces to reach every child — I mean, we tried to immunize every child under age five! It was, of course, a big deal for me, given my own history with polio.

You have said that your childhood was a “magical existence” until, suddenly, you contracted polio. What was that ordeal like?

I was living a safe and magical and correctly mindless life of privilege. Then polio just plucked me out of that existence and threw me into that other land of uncertainty, fear, pain, and even death. Polio was epidemic then. It was a time of fear across America. You didn't go to movies. You didn't swim in public pools. But we had our own swimming pool and our own screening room, so I was not thinking of polio when, on the occasion of my ninth birthday, I just fell to the ground and couldn't get up. Two spinal taps later, I was in the public ward for contagious diseases at Los Angeles General Hospital diagnosed with polio. I thought I might die.

You've also said that the stigma of polio was almost as painful as the disease itself.

When I came home eight months later, after being in an iron lung, my own family had moved out of the house — even my mother. Only my father stayed. The house was repainted. The wallpaper was gone. Carpets were gone. The pool was drained. Our dog had been given away. There was no cure, no prevention, and no one knew how it was transmitted. Therefore, I became a pariah. My schoolmates steered clear of me. They were afraid I still carried the disease. People were afraid to invite me to their house.

Do you feel that contracting polio so young prompted your subsequent commitment to the welfare of children?

I think it gave me an exaggerated sense of empathy for anyone suffering and a precocious knowledge of that other world — the world of illness and stigma. With knowledge comes responsibility. So, it may have led to the fact that I have adopted 10 children and that most of them have had special needs. Maybe that sense of empathy and responsibility was born in the polio wards.

Your adopted son Thaddeus contracted polio. What is his life like?

Just getting through a day is very tough for Thaddeus. He drags himself out of bed and then along the floor to the bathroom. He gets dressed and slithers down the stairs until he can pull himself up into his wheelchair. He has no use of his legs, and one arm is very weak. We live in a small, rural community where he's the only person with a wheelchair in his school. All these years after we had a vaccine, the fact that it was never given to Thaddeus says a lot about our society and the international community. The cases of paralytic polio are now down to around 1,000 worldwide. It's heartening for many, yet bittersweet for my Thaddeus.

Your first trip to Darfur, Sudan, in 2004, was on behalf of UNICEF. Who did you meet and what was discussed?

I met with some ministers, and I pretended that the international community was watching my visit. I wanted to give the impression that we were looking for them to assume greater responsibility for their citizens. It was a delicate situation because no one wanted to confront them. We couldn't just say, "We know you're perpetrating acts of genocide or ethnic cleansing," because UNICEF's priority was to maintain access. That is still a fragile issue, so you walk a fine line between diplomacy and not getting UNICEF kicked out of the region, which would be a catastrophe for those people. Yet you want to say to the officials: "I beg you to take responsibility here. The international community cares."

Do you think your message got through to them?

Obviously not. At the time, the number of dead was listed at around 70,000. Well, that was a gross underestimation, not only from [human] slaughter but also from disease and hunger. Now, the numbers are somewhere between 200,000 and 450,000. It's impossible to know. Some humanitarian workers are in the region, but if the violence deepens and it becomes unsafe again, they will withdraw. If that happens, we'll see hundreds of thousands more dead within months.

What was the most hopeful thing you experienced on that trip?

There were very few positives. The most uplifting thing for me was seeing those humanitarian workers in such difficult and dangerous circumstances, to see their dedication — lest anyone doubt these unsung organizations doing the day-to-day work — and how heroic they are. I was so inspired by them and by the bravery of the women and children in the camps — the hope that was still in their faces!

In an interview after your trip, you said women in those Darfur camps were forced to make "a sort of Sophie's choice" between feeding their kids and survival. Could you talk about that?

The women in the Darfur camps need firewood to cook the food that the World Food Programme gives them, which is a hard, uncooked corn, like maize. It requires about two and a half hours of cooking, and the women must go outside the camps to gather firewood. The men can't go, or they'll be killed. The Janjaweed, these Arab militias, are literally encircling the camps at all times. So, when the women leave and go farther and farther as the months progress to retrieve firewood, they're raped or mutilated and sometimes killed. So, the older women go to save their daughters. They too are raped and killed. It's just a heartbreaking decision for these women, who have no real choice.

Have the horrors you've witnessed in so many places the past several years shaken your faith in human beings?

Oddly enough, they have strengthened my faith in human beings. I have seen the best and the worst that human beings are capable of. It's the best that's etched in the survivors' faces. People who have no security, no protection, no prospects, and they live in daily terror, yet you can see how they love their children and the fervor with which they hope and look to us for help. The humanitarian workers there are doing their utmost to help. You can't even measure the altruism and nobility human beings like them are capable of. just wish that we would have genocide education at the earliest level in our school system, especially for men, because most of this genocide and unspeakable cruelty is committed by men. And I would love to see people taught about peaceful conflict resolution, because that too is a component of human nature.

Just after this interview, Farrow traveled back to the Darfur region of Sudan as a goodwill ambassador. In an editorial she wrote for the 25 July Chicago Tribune, Farrow concluded: "Only a robust UN peacekeeping force can save Darfur. ... Appallingly, the UN and the world community have simply acquiesced, seemingly content to let genocide take its course." Currently, the situation in Darfur remains unstable. – Ed.

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