

# With **A** Mother's **Heart**

*UNICEF's Caryl Stern succeeds on behalf of the world's children.*

by BETH DOUGLASS SILCOX

**I**n a dirt-floor hospital in Sierra Leone, a 6-day-old baby lies in agony, all for the want of a 70-cent vaccination. No stroke of a mother's hand or song from her lips consoles this child, for tetanus is a wicked, supersensory disease. Light, sound and touch only cause pain.

Gathered in this dark makeshift nursery with the 17-year-old mother and medics is a rather unlikely group of visitors, Procter & Gamble executives, movie star Salma Hayek and Caryl Stern, president and CEO of one of the world's most successful nonprofit organizations, the U.S. Fund for UNICEF.

Status, celebrity and business mean nothing here. Raw human emotion fills the space, and all that truly matters is this terribly sick child, the mother, and how this group's partnership can stop the suffering. Soon the cries cease, grieving begins and the child becomes a statistic—one of some 24,000 children around the world who die each day from preventable causes.

**“I grew up in a world where you are your brother's keeper.”**

This is one of the most poignant moments of Caryl Stern's three-year tenure as UNICEF's leader, but it won't be the last. Every day she faces statistics about the plight of the world's children, and every day she works to find the financial wherewithal and political will to stop needless deaths.

Had this young African mother been part of UNICEF's tetanus immunization program, funded through donations from Procter & Gamble's Pampers and publicized by Hayek, the immunity would have passed to her child.

It's with a mother's heart and immense nonprofit business savvy that Stern succeeds on behalf of the world's kids,



whose deaths from childhood illness, unsafe drinking water, malaria, malnutrition, AIDS and abuse are inexcusable to her way of thinking.

Married with three sons and one granddaughter, Stern has worked in the nonprofit sector since the mid-1980s. Prior to coming to UNICEF, she served in executive roles with the Anti-Defamation League.

Resonating at Stern's core is the dichotomy between developed and developing nations, between haves and have-nots, between taking action or simply watching. Raised in a family of Holocaust survivors, turning her back on others in peril was simply not acceptable.

Stern's grandfather had stood on deck of the *S.S. St. Louis*, loaded with refugees from Nazi Germany, when it was rejected at port and returned to Europe's uncertainty. Later, her then-6-year-old mother and 4-year-old uncle were allowed to leave, but only without their parents. Stern's mother "made sure we understood that without help, they wouldn't be alive.

"So I grew up in a world where you are your brother's keeper," she says. That's exactly the sentiment an awe-struck Stern heard in Darfur when talking with women who had lost absolutely everything except the faith that tomorrow would be a better day. With a kiss of a hand, one of the women told Stern, "When you go back to America, you tell them that we know they are saving our lives."

She hears it in the songs of African villagers who pour from huts as UNICEF Jeeps arrive. "They line the street and sing. When you're leaving, they sing you out of town," Stern says.

"As hard as all of it is to see, and I know this is going to sound ironic, but I feel really privileged because I do get to go in



wearing the white hat,” Stern says. “We come in with help. We come in with medication. We come in with people who care. The UNICEF staff on the ground are such amazing heroes, and I get to watch them work, and I get to come back and give voice to all those children here in the United States.”

UNICEF has been giving a voice to the world’s neediest children since it was founded by the United Nations in 1946 to provide food, clothing and health care to European children facing famine and disease after World War II.

In 1980, when UNICEF gathered statistics on how many children under age 5 die of preventable causes, it was an astounding 30 million. In 2008, for the first time, that number dipped below 10 million. “We’ve reduced it by two-thirds, and in the same time period, the world’s population tripled,” Stern says.

UNICEF is a tremendous success story, and during Stern’s four years with the organization, 1,500 fewer children have died each day. In 2009, the latest statistic year available, the United States Fund for UNICEF raised more than \$486 million in total revenue. No major donors reneged on UNICEF pledges last year despite a challenging economy. When \$1 buys enough clean drinking water for a child for 40 days, it’s clear to donors that lives are compromised by smaller donations.

“America, last year, in the heart of this horrific recession, stayed with us. We were one of the few nonprofits in this country that still met our goals,” Stern says. “Even more heartening was the number of \$5, \$10 and \$20 donors increased last year. I think that people who had to tighten their belts understood that as tight as you had to make it here, imagine what that’s doing to children in a developing nation.” That’s not to say it was easy. Stern says, “We’ve worked twice as hard for every dollar we’ve earned, but we’ve earned every dollar that we sought.”

Upon taking over three years ago, Stern applied a now tremendously successful, collaborative, team-focused management system.

A newly formed senior management team “trained” for six months with a team coach, who refocused them any time an individual agenda

took precedent over the team agenda. Closer working relationships resulted.

By valuing the intellectual capacity, not just functional capacity, of employees, Stern has fostered a culture rich in professional development at UNICEF, thereby attracting A-list advocates for UNICEF’s children. “If you don’t feel challenged, if you don’t feel you have the opportunity for some input—where we’re going, what we’re doing—into whatever niche you might fill here,

there are too many other nonprofits who will be happy to scoop you up,” Stern says. “I think that the private sector could learn some of that from the nonprofit sector.”

UNICEF’s ultimate goal of zeroing out those 24,000 daily deaths is lofty. Stern can’t say she’s optimistic enough to think it will happen during her tenure, but UNICEF is stronger for the difference she’s made.

On a personal level, however, some days the most significant difference she makes is to listen intently as a Haitian girl explains that she thought God taught her to fly when the earth started quaking. “What did you do?” Stern asks. “We kept praying and praying and praying. And you know what? God heard me. I’m alive!” the 10-year-old replies.

“Only out of the mouth of a child can you get something like that,” Stern says. “Forget that her school collapsed. People died. There’s no water. She’s living in a tent. She doesn’t really know what’s going to be tomorrow, but God heard her and she’s alive. As I’ve traveled around the globe, God has heard everybody. I have to say the faith of people I’ve met, their ability to maintain that faith, is what sustains you when you are in a hospital and a mom has just lost her child.” **S**