



# Standing Her Ground

WHEN HEALTH ACTIVIST ANNIE SPARROW SOUNDED THE ALARM ABOUT A POLIO OUTBREAK IN WARTORN SYRIA, SHE SHED LIGHT ON A CRITICAL ISSUE—AND SHE PICKED A FIGHT. BY HEIDI MITCHELL.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BÉNÉDICTE KURZEN.

## DOCTOR WITHOUT BORDERS

The activist and physician, CENTER, in Reyhanli, Turkey. She's surrounded by Syrian refugee women in a sewing workshop. "Sparrow is a passionate and dedicated professional who is unafraid to speak her mind," Kofi Annan says.



Can you see me?" asks Annie Sparrow, M.D., in a thick Aussie accent as an image comes into focus on my laptop. And there she is: brilliant smile, blonde hair in bohemian waves, a fur stole wrapped around her neck.

It's 2:00 A.M. in Gaziantep, a Turkish city just a stone's throw from the Syrian border, and Sparrow, a professor of global health at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York, has just spent a long day presenting evidence to international-aid workers on a seven-round polio-vaccination campaign in Syria, where a civil war has been raging since 2011. For more than a year, Sparrow has been working closely with the Assistance Coordination Unit—the humanitarian arm of Syria's opposition coalition—providing training to Syrian medical workers on the diagnosis and treatment of polio. Thousands of volunteers have fanned out across targeted cities like Aleppo and Deir Ezzor, smuggling vials of vaccine in milk trucks, going door-to-door—an effort that has resulted in the successful vaccination of 92 percent of children in opposition-held parts of the country. Sparrow describes the program to me from the lobby of the Teymur Continental Hotel, in the dead of the Turkish night. Of course I can see her; her energy is so effervescent, I can practically touch her.

"I'm going to pass you over to my friends," she says and hands her MacBook to two Syrian doctors: Khaled Almilaji, M.D., the former head of the ACU's health department, and Bashir Tajaldin, M.D., technical coordinator of the vaccination effort. When the first case of polio appeared in Syria in mid-2013, doctors like Almilaji and Tajaldin raised the alarm that an urgent response was needed to prevent an outbreak of the fearsomely contagious disease. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime, they claimed, was systematically targeting doctors and hospitals—and denying the presence of polio. "We heard that there were two cases tested in Damascus, but the Syrian authorities told us that they were actually oil poisoning," says Tajaldin. Agencies such as the World Health Organization and UNICEF were slow to execute a vaccination program; they must operate with sovereign permission, which Assad flatly denied.

The ACU needed an independent voice to spur action—and discovered a forceful and charismatic one in Sparrow. Almilaji met her in Gaziantep in December 2013. A month before, drawing on interviews with doctors and Syrian refugees, Sparrow had written a biting blog post for *The New York Review of Books* accusing the Assad regime of mounting "a direct assault on the medical system" and calling for the U.N. Security Council to push Assad to allow cross-border aid. More *NYRB* posts followed, as well as a deeply researched piece titled "Syria's Polio Epidemic: The Suppressed Truth," which described "more than ninety" documented cases in the country and accused





#### THE FIGHTER

Sparrow a few hundred feet from the Syrian border. "Because she's not affiliated with aid organizations, she can be an informed public critic," says her husband, Kenneth Roth.

international-aid agencies of egregious negligence. "Annie's very crucial articles pushed the United Nations and the big donors to run to Turkey and Damascus to help," says Almilaji in the glow of the after-hours lobby. "Then they worked effectively." The vaccination program launched on January 2, 2014, some two months after Sparrow's first blog post. Approximately 1.4 million children have been vaccinated during the effort—though this has come with a cost. While Sparrow was at the border later that January, two volunteers were killed, and one lost her leg, from an Assad bombing campaign. "It was just hideous," Sparrow says.

**A** week before our Skype chat, I visit Sparrow's Upper West Side apartment. I'm greeted at the door by her six-year-old son, Toto, who promptly ties my legs together with string as his mom combs through two closets, deciding what to pack for a week of research in autumnal Gaziantep. As she tosses color-blocked dresses off hangers and shares a bottle of rosé with me, Annie's lanky and clearly love-struck husband, Kenneth Roth, the head of Human Rights Watch, tells me how proud he is of the work she's doing. "Hardly anyone with Annie's medical



background goes on the ground,” he says. “And because she is not affiliated with any aid organizations, she can be in the role of an informed public critic.”

Former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan agrees. “Dr. Annie Sparrow is a passionate and dedicated professional who is unafraid to speak her mind,” Annan writes me by email. “She rightly points out that health care is the first casualty of war.”

Born to an Australian home-economics teacher and a physiologist on a research fellowship at the University of Michigan—“Poor Mum was 37 weeks pregnant when we arrived in Ann Arbor and gave birth about ten seconds later,” Sparrow says—the 46-year-old physician has lived a peripatetic life. When Annie was ten months old, the Sparrow family (Annie has an older sister and a younger brother) sailed across the Atlantic on the *QE2*, moved back to Australia, and eventually returned to suburban Perth, with weekends and summers spent free-form on a patch of family land near the Margaret

River. “We dug pits for latrines and had to light a fire to make a cup of tea. Mum could cook five-course meals on a bush fire,” she recalls. Sparrow likes to joke that she was raised by wolves, tethered to no one and nothing but the land, but in truth, her parents instilled in her a strong work ethic and the importance of presentation. “My mum taught me that you should care enough about people to look nice,” she tells me. “That’s why I wear Missoni in the field: It’s beautiful. And when I wear it I think, Mum would be proud.”

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When Sparrow flew the nest, it was to follow her elder sister and father into medicine, first at a facility in the desert of Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, then in London as a critical-care pediatrician at some of the city’s top hospitals. “It was the late nineties, and we were like medical It girls,” Sparrow says of her coterie of friends at St. Mary’s and St. Thomas’, who played as hard as they worked. “Henley, the BAFTA awards at St. Martins Lane. . . . I’d practice medicine for 24 hours and then party it off.” In late 2000, she visited her brother in Afghanistan, where he was working in development, providing microfinance and agricultural aid, and was shocked by the conditions. “There we were in our ivory tower in London, spending hundreds of thousands of pounds to save one life, and they were making do on pennies in Afghanistan.”

It was a defining moment. When Sparrow was recruited back to Perth in pediatric intensive care, she volunteered at the Woomera immigration detention center, one of the most punitive and notorious such facilities in Australia. “It wasn’t like I was such an amazing person so I went off to Woomera,” she tells me. “The truth is, I was hideously dumped, and it was a way to make me feel

better.” There, she says, she witnessed indignity on a grand scale: asylum seekers on hunger strikes; suicidal teenagers sedated and thrown in solitary. Disgusted, she and a colleague decried the human rights violations to the Australian media—criticisms that made international headlines. “It was a crash course in media training,” Sparrow says. “And it got me interested in public health.”

At Harvard, where she would earn her master’s in the subject, Sparrow had a reputation for insatiable curiosity. “Everyone else was so overwhelmed, but Annie would fit in a drawing class at the School of Design,” recalls Sparrow’s closest friend, Ellen Agler, now CEO of the END Fund, a nonprofit dedicated to ending neglected tropical diseases. “She had this incredible capacity for learning. And she is scary smart.” It was at Harvard that Sparrow first encountered Roth, “annihilating,” as she puts it, hawkish Canadian politician Michael Ignatieff during an Iraq War debate moderated by Samantha Power. “I thought, *That’s* a man I could marry,” she told Agler at the time. But

she had a class to get to and didn’t introduce herself. After Harvard she did a stint in Darfur monitoring child rights, and then settled in Nairobi to head up UNICEF’s Somalia malaria program. Free time? Volunteering post-Katrina or working in places like civil war–torn Timor-Leste. She demurs when I ask about the relationship that led to the birth of her son; she simply describes becoming a mother as a “happy accident from working across so many time zones.” Alexander spent his early years in Nairobi (and still goes by his Swahili nickname). It wasn’t until Sparrow happened upon a piece on Roth in the October 2008

issue of *Vanity Fair* that she finally reached out to her future husband, with whom she had crossed paths in New York. “The piece was by Brad Pitt, so I shot Ken an email saying, ‘Oooh, aren’t you grand?’” A long-distance romance followed, in which Sparrow and Roth met up anywhere she could fly to directly from Nairobi: Istanbul, Paris, London, Zurich (near Davos, where she could snowboard). Roth eventually lured Sparrow back to New York in March 2010; Human Rights Watch supporter Steven Spielberg lent the couple his Fifth Avenue apartment while they searched for their own. They wed in Paris in 2011, a bittersweet time: That fall, the couple had lost their newborn son, Gabriel (born prematurely, he lived only two days in the hospital). Sparrow’s father died of cancer weeks before their wedding; then the family property near the Margaret River suffered a fire. Sparrow lost her mother suddenly the next spring. The memories bring tears to her eyes. “The only good thing about all that was,” she says, wiping them away, “the more loss you go through, the more you can share with other people.”

“HER ONLY COMPASS POINT IS WHAT SHE SEES FOR HERSELF IN THE FIELD,” SAYS HER FRIEND LORD MARK MALLOCH-BROWN, FORMER DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE U.N.



Sparrow never intended to become a public advocate through journalism—but her *NYRB* pieces, rigorously documented and scathing in tone, elicited a strong response, not least from the agencies she accused of negligence. WHO and Save the Children—which she wrote let 250,000 doses of polio vaccine expire in Syrian warehouses—objected fiercely in letters to the publication. Bruce Aylward, M.D., WHO’s assistant director-general for polio and emergencies, accused Sparrow of printing “errors of fact or omission” that “confuse public understanding of the magnitude of the outbreak.” In both cases Sparrow replied with point-by-point rebuttals. (I reached out to WHO and Save the Children about Sparrow; both organizations declined to comment.) “There was no issue that they raised that was left unresponded to,” says Robert Silvers, Sparrow’s editor and a cofounder of the *NYRB*. “We think she is an extraordinary researcher. We’re very proud of her work.”

The articles caught the attention of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which had been funneling \$1.5 billion to a coalition including WHO to eradicate polio. “I felt like she was raising such valuable points from such a unique perspective—as a doctor, on the border—in the mainstream media, she couldn’t be dismissed,” says Gabrielle Fitzgerald, at the time the director of Global Program Advocacy at Gates. (Fitzgerald is now with the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation’s \$100 million Ebola program.) Fitzgerald connected Sparrow to the head of the Gateses’ polio program; the organization had already been aware of the ACU and ultimately granted more than \$4 million directly to it.

Though Sparrow has been sharply focused on Syria in recent months, she has weighed in on public health crises elsewhere, too. In April she tweeted about the impending Ebola outbreak, even while WHO and others downplayed its spread (she wrote about Ebola for *The Nation* in October); she’s testified at The Hague about war crimes in Darfur; and she’s attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, speaking up to cast doubt on success stories like Rwanda, where development has been fruitful but human rights remain elusive. “She is a brave—and above all independent—witness to failings on the humanitarian front line,” says her friend Lord Mark Malloch-Brown, former deputy secretary-general of the UN, whose own panel discussions at Davos are standing-room only. “Her only compass point is what she sees for herself in the field.”

As for the future, Sparrow will continue traveling to the Syrian border, monitoring conditions firsthand. “Within the community, we know what Dr. Annie is fighting for—for justice, not just for the Syrians, but for anyone suffering,” says Dima Haj Darwish, an engineer from Aleppo who founded the Ulfah House in Gaziantep to support widows and orphans, and whose husband works with Sparrow to train doctors in war-zone trauma. Haj Darwish and I Skyped while Sparrow was staying with her during her most recent visit. “She keeps coming back,” she said to me. “She has no fear. We call her the Fighter.” □