

Henrietta Holsman Fore, executive director, UNICEF



Before joining UNICEF in 2018, Henrietta held high governmental posts as Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Director of the U.S. Mint, and Undersecretary of State for Management.

Conversation with Barbara Baumberger Crane

On our Wellesley graduation day, how did you see your future?

I couldn't wait for a new adventure. I got married my senior year, and my husband's job was in Denver, so that's where we headed. I wanted to do something that had to do with international affairs. I was a history major. I loved business. I also knew I wanted to use my mind and my good education. I think the Wellesley motto must have been completely ingrained in me by the time I left.

I grew up in Chicago, but my mother was from Switzerland. She would talk about World War II and what they went through. And as a young man, my father went drove an ambulance in Paris during World War I. So I had heard about the world; I wanted to go see it. At Wellesley, I spent a lot of time in history, economics, and art courses—and in all of them you realize that it's an interconnected world.

Looking back, I would have been pleased I got a chance to serve others. I want to make the world a better place. I want to help as many people as I can. I adore big, international complex, tough organizations and jobs.

Talk about high points of your career after Wellesley.

I'm really pleased that I had a chance to serve in business, in government, and also in non-profits. I have been what Joe Nye from Harvard has called a "tri-sector athlete," meaning that you can run between these sectors in life, which are all part of the fabric about how the world operates. My first years were in the federal government. Then the manager of one of my father's companies died. So he said "why don't you just come and help me out?" Well, I stayed 12 years, and it was a wonderful experience in a small manufacturing business in the steel industry.

Later, I was lucky I had a chance to serve in government. I started at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), where I could use my operational experience, do international work and do some good for people—and use my Wellesley motto. Then I had a wonderful string of jobs that led me to the departments of Treasury and State and now to the United Nations.

UNICEF’s mission to help children around the world is enormous. Talk about your work there.

One part of my job is serving on the senior staff of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. I’m involved in peace agreements and negotiations that are going on all over the world to try to bring a cessation to hostilities. My second job is running an independent U.N. agency. UNICEF looks after children between the ages of 0 and 18 and we are in 192 countries. Areas that we work on include nutrition, especially for children in their first 1000 days, and primary health care, which is massively important right now. Half of the world's vaccines go through our doors. We have over a billion dollars of projects in education, and we are a very big player in water and sanitation. We also undertake protection for children who are refugees or in other ways victims of violence.

We raise our budget every year, a little bit shy of \$7 billion, two-thirds from governments, and one-third from private sources. I have 20,000 fabulous dedicated people working for UNICEF and lots of partners— non-profit organizations, private companies, other government agencies, host country governments and ministers, and just people in all walks of life. They are the network that keeps UNICEF going.

The current pandemic must be changing your agenda and priorities. How are you experiencing this crisis?

I had been traveling about half the time, but now I'm a video traveler. We have to be in touch with the people who are on the front lines, and many are separated from their families now in lockdowns.

Communication is number one among the requests we get right now— helping governments talk to people about how to stay safe, employing every language and dialect in the world. Our communication teams are using television, radio, buses, and handbills that are tacked up everywhere.

The second area of requests is supplies— gowns, masks, goggles, oxygen ventilators and now oxygen concentrators. In a normal year, we would buy 25,000 masks for hospitals and clinics. This year, we are ordering 2 trillion.

The third request we get is in the area of water and sanitation. We need mobile hand-washing stations. We need water everywhere, especially in Africa.

The fourth area is digital online learning. Luckily, we had previously launched a program to connect every child in the world to the internet. You can learn everything on your cell phone at home or in your classroom with the tablet, wherever you are, even in a refugee camp.

I know the polio vaccination campaign is suffering a great deal now, although the polio infrastructure is helping with the response to COVID.

Yes, we were so excited about the Democratic Republic of Congo being able to be polio-free and Ebola-free —but you're right, now we're in a pause. We're going to have to retrain many of those workers. Testing and surveillance is going to be essential in COVID, and we learned it in

polio, in Ebola and in Zika. Volunteers who can do community surveillance are going to get us out of this pandemic.

You appear to be handling your role with aplomb and good humor. How do you keep a balance in your life? How do you find joy and diversion?

I wish I could tell you that I have some version of balance, but I don't. To me, if you've got something to do, throw yourself into it a hundred and twenty percent and hope for the best. The balance comes in seeing things that I can get accomplished. What I really need most is sleep! I also need to have a happy heart, so it's wonderful for me when I get to be near my husband and my sister.

And then, when I'm out in the field, we meet with children. Their eyes are sparkling. They're so excited about some accomplishment or a dream that they have. You want to dream with them. The nice thing about UNICEF is that you have to stay relevant. You're always thinking about what's coming next. It's a different world for today's children, quite different from our lives.

One of the things I would hope we get out of COVID is a new sense of our humanity, of our humaneness, so that we realize how extraordinarily lucky are those of us who have water and a bar of soap, food and a roof over our heads.

Do you have a memory of a class or a professor or just college life that you'd like to share?

Well, you remember silly everyday things and things that really have been important in your life. In the silly category, it's the Lorna Doone cookies. We ate them by the bagful. Of course, I remember my professors, such as Dr. Gulick, who taught me to walk through history, seeing the centuries, ideas, passions, religions, wars, and revolutions that had gone before me, and my professors in art and architecture, the classics, Russian literature, and Bible studies. And I remember fun with sports—crew, tennis, and our sailing team on Lake Waban.

As I thought about what has made a difference in my life, it has been Wellesley friendships. Your girlfriends are always with you no matter what else happens—marriages, divorces, deaths. A friend makes a big difference and you see that in a home, in an office, and in an organization. I even see that with countries you can be friends. If you create a good friendship, it can change the world for you or for them, and it makes all the difference. So if I may say, I think we were fortunate to learn friendship.