



COMMUNITY KICK-OFF CELEBRATION

Monday, February 6, 2006



“Improving the lives of people around the world is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. Our foundation focuses on diseases and health issues that affect people in the developing world. Bill and I support Children’s Hospital because we believe in its goal of developing and delivering innovative life-saving treatments that may eventually benefit children everywhere.”

Melinda French Gates

Along with her husband, Melinda Gates co-chairs the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which seeks to improve people’s lives by bringing advances in health and learning to those who need them most.

The Vision Belongs to All of Us

Thanks for this warm welcome – and Laurie, thank you for that generous introduction.

It’s an honor, and honestly, it’s also a lot of fun, to be here again with friends and supporters of Children’s Hospital. I want to thank Laurie for her kind mention of the TIME Magazine honor. Bill and I have been pointing out for a long time that when 300 people die in a plane crash, it’s worldwide page one news; but when thousands of children die every day from preventable diseases, it barely gets a mention. TIME Magazine has used this honor to call attention not only to poverty and disease in the world, but to the legitimate hope we have to end it. We thank them for that.

I should tell you that, when Bill, Bono and I gathered for the TIME photo shoot, Bill wanted to make sure that we didn’t get big heads over this. As many of you know, Bill really likes numbers – he can quantify anything – so he reminded us that none of us were actually “Person of the Year.” We were just *one-third* of a “Person of the Year.” So, while it’s kind of you to mention this honor, I can’t personally accept your congratulations, because each of us is “Person of the Year” only one day in three – and today is just not *my* day.

Seattle Children’s Hospital belongs to all of us. We all have experiences that remind us what a precious family resource it is. Just last year, our two-year-old was stricken

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very suddenly with a serious case of the flu. In the middle of the night, we called the doctor, and she said: “Take her to Children’s. She needs fluids now; you can’t wait till morning.”

So we drove to the emergency room at 2 am – and they took instant, tender, expert care of our daughter, as we knew they would. We’ve all had moments like this. So I’d like to take a minute to salute the staff at Children’s – beginning with the people who do our paperwork at 2 am. They are all kind and immensely capable professionals. And the doctors are amazing. The doctors at Children’s could work anywhere in the world, and they choose to work for all of us here in Seattle. All parents want to know that their children are getting the best possible care – and these are the people that give us that assurance. Let’s stop for a moment and thank them.

The Vision of Children’s, however, goes beyond giving our families great care. The vision, as Dr. Hansen just said, is to prevent, treat, and someday do away with illness in children. Many sensible people would scoff at that goal. But great accomplishments don’t come from small ambitions. And the cost of aiming too low is to accept a world where children die from disease. Seattle Children’s Hospital will not accept it. Neither will I – and neither will you. The Vision belongs to all of us. And I want to thank you all for being part of it.

Eliminating disease in children is a goal that takes some audacity – even just to say it. What will it take to achieve it? It will take phenomenal scientific and medical advances. But it will take more than science.

Let’s imagine for a moment that the world discovers a vaccine for AIDS. But then – imagine that we don’t give the vaccine to everyone who needs it. Only the people who can pay for it get it – and the poor are left to die. We couldn’t possibly let that happen, right?

We already are. That’s what’s happening in the world today – in measles, in diphtheria, in tetanus, in hepatitis B – in a whole range of diseases that have vaccines which you and I make sure our own children and grandchildren receive, but that are not fully delivered to children in

the developing world. Bill and I mark our commitment to global health from the moment we read a 1993 World Bank Development Report that showed that millions of people were dying from preventable diseases. It was just unbelievable. There was statistical evidence staring us in the face that some lives are valued more than others. We thought: “This can’t be true. But if it’s true, it deserves to be the priority of our giving.” Since then, the Foundation has been supporting breakthrough medical research and also bringing partners together to deliver the low-cost, life-saving breakthroughs we already have.

Our work has made one thing clear: Eliminating disease requires mind and heart working together. We need both. Without science, we can’t do it. Without compassion, we won’t do it.

So how can we bring the world’s mind and heart together to help eliminate disease?

First, we have to feel in our hearts that the death of a child we don’t know is just as tragic as the death of a child we do know. Children’s does that now by paying the expenses of families in our region who need care, but can’t afford it. I can’t think of a better example of loving your neighbor as yourself. If there is a prescription for ending disease, that’s it.

Every time I travel to the developing world, I get a sharpening realization of how human beings everywhere are the same. We have the same hopes and dreams, and we all want the very best for our children. It is part of what it means to be human.

I remember in Haiti last March seeing mothers with babies sick and crying, sitting in the stifling heat, hour after hour, hoping a nurse or a doctor would see their baby. When I asked how long they’d been there, I was told they were still waiting from the day before, and they had walked from a village that’s not anywhere nearby – because that is what it takes to save their babies’ lives.

When Bill and I were in India in December, we paid a visit to a very poor family – the kind of family that often gets left out of low-cost, life-saving medical discoveries

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that we take for granted in our country. They lived in a slum in a room only slightly larger than the family bed, where Bill and I were offered a seat. We were talking to the mom and dad, as I held their 12-week baby girl in my arms, and the 3-year old ‘big sister’ played with us on the bed. It was wonderful to experience the amazing joy of the family with their little girl and their new baby. As we were leaving, I asked: “Are you going to have more children?” The mother looked down, and said: “I think my husband would like to have a son.” Then she corrected herself and said: “I think we would like to have a son, so we may have one more.” Then the father, who was across the room, beaming from ear to ear, said: “I don’t need a son. I am overjoyed with my two little girls. Our family is complete.”

Can’t you imagine having that same discussion with a neighbor down the street? We’re all the same. If we knew and felt how much families around the world are like us, and we are like them – we wouldn’t abandon them. We would insist on a world where every child and every family gets the preventive care, vaccines and treatments they need to live a healthy life.

We’re not there yet. But it’s not because human beings lack heart. It’s because when problems seem too big to solve, we give up hope, and then the heart shuts down. But there is hope for ending disease. We see it everywhere that people are making the most of their scientific and moral capacities. And I am proud to say I see it at Seattle Children’s Hospital. At Children’s, you see in action the human formula of mind and heart that can one day end disease.

I’ve told many of you before the story of our family friends from Argentina, who brought their son Ignacio here to Children’s, hoping for a bone marrow transplant that would save his life. The doctors did everything medically possible for Ignacio, but in the end, he died. One of the most amazing things about that experience, though, was that despite their deep sorrow about the loss of their son, Ignacio’s parents were filled with love and gratitude for the help that Children’s had given them.

They knew that Children’s would give them the best medical care in the world. But they were completely unprepared for how Children’s wrapped its arms around them. The people at Children’s helped the family figure out their living situation, helped them arrange child care, provided translators – and embraced them emotionally during a terribly difficult time.

After Ignacio’s family want back to Argentina, they wanted to reach out and embrace others the way Children’s had embraced them. The mother went back to school to become a psychologist and offer grief counseling for young children. The family began volunteering time at the Ronald McDonald House in their home town. A few years ago, they moved to Chile, and opened the first Ronald McDonald house in Santiago. Would they have been so moved to touch the lives of other people if they had not been so embraced here at Children’s? I don’t think so.

This story says so much to me – because it shows how Children’s is a fusion of mind and heart. It is the best science guided by the greatest compassion every step of the way. You see it when you walk in the doors of the hospital. You expect to see the latest medical technology, and you do. But you also see the Whale elevator and the Balloon hallway, and the Playroom, where there are no sticks or pokes. Children’s is just overflowing with heart in the way children and families are treated; in the commitment to pay for families in our region who can’t afford the care; in the determination to take standard medical procedures and pioneer the subtle techniques that make them possible for the tiniest children. And there is huge heart in Children’s research agenda: people devoting their rare and stunning scientific skill to ease suffering and end disease – and making sure as many people as possible can benefit from it.

I’m especially excited by the work Children’s is doing in AIDS. Dr. Lisa Frenkel – the medical director of Children’s HIV/AIDS program – often travels with her magnificent team to places like India and South Africa to help train doctors to better treat patients, avoid neonatal and fetal infection in pregnant mothers, gather data, and conduct research on ways to provide high-quality care, even in the poorest settings.

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Children’s recently did a study in Peru, authored by Dr. Ann Melvin, that shows it is feasible to use a rapid HIV detection test during labor and – if the mother tests positive – instantly deliver nevirapine to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV. They’re also working on studies in Mozambique and South Africa, trying to find methods to allow HIV positive mothers to breastfeed without transmitting the virus.

There are so many inspiring, life-saving accomplishments at Children’s:

Dr. Bonnie Ramsey has done research in cystic fibrosis that’s been credited with doubling the life expectancy of children with CF.

Specialists here at Children’s have mastered procedures using catheters threaded to the heart through blood vessels, which essentially allow them to do heart surgery without cutting open a tiny chest.

Conditions that previously required 10-12 operations to correct can be done by Children’s surgeons in one or two.

Researchers at Children’s are also discovering how certain bacteria in the reproductive tract can cause premature labor – and further research could lead to a vaccine to prevent prematurity. When you consider that 4 million newborns worldwide die every year before 4 weeks of life – and more than half of those deaths are directly or indirectly caused by prematurity – the worldwide, life-saving impact of this research could be just staggering.

Investments here at Children’s lead to better, healthier lives for children and families everywhere – including millions of children who will never visit our hospital—or even this side of the globe. That’s why Children’s Vision is to end childhood disease; a lesser mission is too small an ambition for this collection of talent.

Bill and I support Children’s because it’s a natural extension of the way we see children in the world. But we would be supporting Children’s even if we had no

charitable foundation. Supporting Children’s is a long-cherished, closely-held Gates family belief.

Some 12 years ago, when I was engaged to Bill and my wedding day was approaching, a bridal event was given in my honor. Friends and family members offered short talks and toasts, and speaking last was Bill’s mom Mary Gates. She read aloud from a wonderful letter about marriage that she had written to me, and at the close, she said: “From those to whom much is given, much is expected.”

At the time of our wedding, Mary was seriously ill with cancer, and she was sending a message that was tender and affectionate but also deeply serious. She was calling on us to carry on her work. As you all know, Mary served on the Hospital Board for 14 years and the Foundation Board for 8 years. She devoted more time to Children’s than she did to any other organization.

Mary didn’t work at Children’s because she wanted to spend time volunteering. She worked because she wanted to change things, and she knew change could happen through Children’s – as long as everyone supported the mission, including her son and his wife. I wouldn’t say that Mary encouraged us to embrace Children’s – as much as she inspired us to do it. She never told us what to do; she showed us.

It’s been an honor and a privilege to support this phenomenal hospital and embrace its mission. Children’s puts science to its highest human use – to ease suffering and end disease. Let’s remember: this was the original purpose. Children’s was founded by a broken-hearted Seattle mother who lost her son, and thought that her hometown needed a hospital dedicated exclusively to the special care of children. Today, we support it so we can join in the thrill of scientific discovery, but it goes deeper than that. We want to create for more and more mothers and fathers the miraculous experience of seeing their sick child made well. The vision belongs to all of us ... and so will the joy of achieving it. Thank you very much.