

Dr. Nicole Grasset
July 1927 - August 2009

Nicole was an exceptional woman. As friends and colleagues received word of her passing and sent messages of condolence to her family, the impact of Nicole's work and life became more and more apparent.

She was born in South Africa and spent the first 20 years of her life there with her sister Ariette and their parents. The family moved to Switzerland after WWII where Nicole did her medical studies and joined the Swiss Federation of Medical Doctors as a dermatologist. But clinical medicine didn't satisfy her. She left to study at the London School of Tropical Medicine and began to do research on influenza and rabies at the Pasteur Institute in Paris. Nicole adored Paris, and the freedom it gave her to do as she pleased! She was invited to attend a Conference in Teheran and made the journey overland, alone in her VW with her two dogs.

Later, she witnessed the student and worker uprising in Paris, May 1968, and left a vivid account about her experiences. She took no part of the revolt, but was a bystander looking at the events with a curious and open mind.

She went to work for the International Red Cross in Biafra where she found herself under bombardment and described the hardship and famine there. The job that most affected her life was heading the ambitious World Health Organization smallpox eradication campaign in South-east Asia. She spent several years in India working 7 days a week organising the programme and seeking funds, and going into small villages to discover where the epidemic was resurging. Vaccination did the rest. For her outstanding work Nicole became an international figure. Perseverance, stamina and devotion to accomplish this unprecedented task won her recognition and esteem from her colleagues. Her personal ties with the team remain strong until today.

After smallpox was eradicated in the world, Nicole, along with SEVA colleagues and WHO consultants, carried out the Nepal Blindness Survey which was a scientifically sound survey on blindness and visual impairment. The result of the Survey was the forerunner of the development of the WHO Nepal Blindness Programme, of which she was the first WHO Programme Manager. This programme is hailed as one of the most successful and sustainable globally. It antedated the VISION 2020 Global Initiative for the Elimination of Avoidable Blindness by almost 20 years, and provided a partnership model which is widely in place today.

Nicole had a particular passion for reaching children. Within the Nepal programme she designed a surveillance system for early detection of children suffering from vitamin A deficiency and other life and sight threatening conditions.

The focal point of Nicole's whole life was helping others, in any and every way possible; leading ambitious programmes with an iron will, or helping a blind person from Nepal to attend school for the sight impaired, and as the son of an Afghan colleague still remembers, 20 years later, she helped him get a scholarship to university. For Nicole, nothing seemed impossible. Her optimism, sense of humour and joy of life will be missed by all who knew her.

Written by Nedd and Poppy Willard & R. Pararajasegaram