

Rocking in the real world

Dr. Samantha Nutt cringes when she recalls a news report she heard following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the US. “It was a streeter [interview] and this woman was saying, ‘I don’t care who pays, just as long as someone does big time.’”

That type of attitude horrifies Nutt. “People are throwing [the word] ‘war’ around like it doesn’t have horrific implications for millions of people,” says Nutt, a family physician who founded War Child Canada. Although she shares the world’s horror and disgust over the terrorist attacks, she says it is important to advocate for a measured response.

Nutt, 31, wishes that those who support military action by the US government could see war the way she does — not as “video-game war” with strategic bombing, but through the eyes of a child in Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan or Sierra Leone.

Changing people’s attitudes toward war is one reason Nutt founded War Child Canada (www.warchild.ca), a nonprofit organization that works with the music industry to help children affected by war and to convince Canadian youth to get involved.

These days, Nutt is worried about Afghani civilians. On a visit to Iraq last January, she and her husband, Dr. Eric Hoskins, witnessed the hostility many felt toward the US. “You see the anger and the hopelessness of the children. That really contributes to these horrible terrorist activities. Positive change lies in giving young people everywhere a chance for hope and opportunity. You can take out one Osama bin Laden, but there are 50 other [potential] Osama bin Ladens out there.”

Nutt’s international awareness began in childhood when her family lived in South Africa, where her father designed shoes for Bata. Later, her family spent 6 months in Brazil. However, she says she didn’t become actively engaged until she entered McMaster University in pursuit of a combined arts and science degree, and Professor Herb Jenkins challenged students to become leaders, regardless of their area of interest. “It was a life-defining moment for me,” says Nutt.

As a medical student, Nutt spent some of her elective time working on women’s health projects in the United Arab Emirates. She earned her medical degree from McMaster in 1994 and her master’s degree in public health from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine a year later. In 1995 she joined a UNICEF team in Somalia, where she studied maternal and child health. “Once you’ve been in a

war zone, your life changes, your perspective changes, your whole world view changes. It is impossible not to acknowledge that your life has been fundamentally altered.”

Since then, Nutt has worked in hot spots around the world — Burundi, the Thai–Burmese border, Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Iraq. She first heard about War Child while studying in England, and she created the Canadian offshoot in 1999 to help connect young Canadians with their counterparts in war zones. She asked rock musicians to help spread

War Child’s message. “Musicians are role models for youth, so it was a natural fit,” says Nutt, the executive director. War Child Canada received some government support, but things really started rolling when MuchMusic offered to produce the charity’s public service announcement. “Every time MuchMusic airs something, we just get inundated with emails and phone calls.”

War Child also raises funds through concerts — a benefit concert in Winnipeg featuring the Tragically Hip and Chantal Kreviazuk attracted 80 000 fans and \$150 000 in on-site donations — and several musicians who have participated subsequently travelled overseas with the organization and are featured in *Musicians in*

the War Zone, a documentary coproduced by Nutt and Hoskins with MuchMusic, and funded by Bell Canada.

Today, War Child Canada provides support and money to projects in Sierra Leone, Iraq, Uganda, Colombia, Ethiopia, Ghana and Thailand, and it is now working to provide humanitarian relief to Afghani children.

In addition to her work with War Child Canada, Nutt commutes every second week from her home in Chelsea, Que., to the Sunnybrook and Women’s College Health Science Centre in Toronto. There, she works with a mix of new immigrants, refugees, the poor and young women.

Nutt often receives enquiries from doctors and students who want to do humanitarian work. She says their first step should be to get experience in an area where the conflict has ended, or in a developing country. To provide such experience, she founded the International Health Fellowship Program. It has closed due to funding difficulties, “but I’m working on how to relaunch it. I’m the kind of person who, when someone says ‘no,’ I go right back in and ask ‘why not?’”

For Nutt, that appears to be an attitude that works. — *Janis Hass, Ottawa*



Dr. Samantha Nutt at a refugee camp on the Thai–Burmese border in November 2000