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Roberta Sonnino, associate dean for faculty affairs at the University of Minnesota Medical School, is an advocate for having an avocation. Hers is with a photography. Here she is with a favorite photograph—of the hand of a premature infant resting inside the hand of a resident.

*Photo by Steve Wewerka*

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## PULSE

### A Life in Pictures

**Taking photos is the best medicine for pediatric surgeon Roberta Sonnino.**

By Suzy Frisch

Of the thousands of pictures Roberta Sonnino, M.D., has taken over the years, one in particular illustrates for her the powerful connection between her photography and her career in pediatric surgery: It's of a premature baby, swaddled in blue surgical towels, resting her tiny hand in the large hand of the chief surgical resident. To Sonnino, the image of their hands together exudes compassion, healing, and the fragility of life. "That picture became the emblem for me," says Sonnino, who captured the moment in 1990 when she was an assistant professor of surgery and pediatrics at Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital in Cleveland.

Now a professor of pediatric surgery and associate dean for faculty affairs at the University of Minnesota Medical School, Sonnino also is a professional photographer whose work has been exhibited across the country and published in books, magazines, journals, and online. "Being a photographer is a big part of who I am, and it was a big part of my practice," she says.

Sonnino began shooting photos to relieve stress during the early days of her medical career. She says it still helps her unwind, although she retired from clinical practice in 2004. "The best way I can summarize it is that photography is my mental sanity. If I'm stressed, tired, frustrated, or have something on my mind, the first thing I do is grab my camera. The world we live in is very regulated. Surgery is very regulated—you have to do things a certain way. This allows my creative side to come out."

And while giving Sonnino an outlet, photography also has served her professionally. It's provided her with another way to forge bonds with her patients and their families.

### Sharp Shooter

Born into a family of photographers, Sonnino began snapping photos around the age of 3 with her father's camera. She spent most of her childhood in her parents' native Italy, and often Venice and the Dolomite Alps served as stunning backdrops in her pictures. Her skill became apparent early, and by the time she was in high school, her classmates were paying for her pictures.

She didn't combine photography with medicine until medical school, when the chair of her department at the University of Padova asked Sonnino to take clinical photos during his operations.

Eventually, photography developed into an important part of Sonnino's practice. About nine years ago, when digital photography made it easy to slip a small camera into her lab coat, Sonnino started shooting pictures of her patients and other babies in the neonatal intensive care unit (ICU).

At first, the photos were just for her personal use and for teaching purposes. But over time, she started printing copies for the parents of her patients. And that's when her practice—and her relationship with her patients—changed.

"I think it allowed me to connect with my patients and their families on a completely different level," she says. "I wasn't just a doctor or surgeon telling them what's right or wrong with their kid. There was a human connection that opened the door for conversations you might not have had with families and their kids." She noticed a greater sense of trust and sensed families were more comfortable asking questions about their child's care without worrying that they were wasting her time.

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She began to see her patients differently, too. They were no longer “the appendectomy in Room 2,” she says. “They were the cute kid who had an appendectomy in Room 2.”

Eventually, Sonnino started photographing infants in the neonatal ICU weekly. She would create albums that documented the first months of these fragile babies’ lives and give them to the families right before the infants were discharged.

Taking pictures was often the farthest thing from the minds of the parents, who were so intently focused on caring for their children. Some didn’t own a camera or couldn’t afford to pay a photographer. “People don’t think to bring cameras in, or in life and death situations they feel it’s inappropriate,” Sonnino says. “When I started handing out pictures to my patients, I thought the reaction was over the top. But my staff told me most of my patients didn’t have an 8-by-10 of their child, and I had given them something they thought they would never have.”

### **Photos for Grieving Parents**

Sonnino also volunteers for Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep, a nonprofit that provides free professional photographs to families whose babies are stillborn, terminally ill, or die in early infancy. Since she began working with the organization in 2006, she has taken pictures for about 50 families. “It makes a humongous difference in families’ grieving process and their ability to heal. The families were never going to take their babies home. Now they have these pictures they can cherish,” Sonnino says. “You also get a huge sense of satisfaction. I no longer take care of the kids, so it allows me to do something to help these families in a different way.”

Although mostly self-taught, Sonnino has completed a correspondence course through the New York Institute of Photography and participated in several photography workshops over the years. Earlier this year, she passed the Professional Photographers of America exam and is on her way to becoming a Certified Professional Photographer. She often pores over photography books and magazines, gaining inspiration from Ansel Adams, Galen Rowell, Anne Geddes, and Sandy Puc’, the co-founder of Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep.

Sonnino’s favorite subjects are children, but she also enjoys shooting flowers, bugs, and coral reefs as well as sunsets, underwater sea life, aerial pictures of land, and reflections on water. Her photograph of the silhouette of an airplane against a yellow field at sunset graces the cover of the book *Ghost Plane* by Stephen Grey. The television show “Extreme Makeover” turned her “Cloud Nine,” an aerial shot of clouds hovering over the land, into a tile floor for a client’s bedroom.

Numerous galleries have held shows that included Sonnino’s work. Locally, her photos have been displayed at the University of Minnesota’s Amplatz Children’s Hospital and Hennepin County Medical Center. Her images have also appeared in shows sponsored by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Nebraska, the University of Kansas Medical Center’s Child Development Unit, and the March of Dimes. In addition, they are displayed on her website, [www.hiresphotos.com](http://www.hiresphotos.com). In 2007, Sonnino was commissioned to take pictures for *Journey to Authenticity: Voices of Chief Residents*, a coffee table-type book published by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education. Sonnino traveled around the country taking portraits for that book, which won several awards.

### **Advocate for an Avocation**

Sonnino’s office at the U boasts just a few of her photos, including a poster-sized shot of an arena in Verona, Italy, at night and a close-up of two cats’ faces. She plans to ramp up her photography business, marketing her services and seeking medical photography or portraiture jobs after she retires.

For now, though, Sonnino is trying to teach her peers about the importance of having outside interests. (In addition to photography, she also enjoys alpine skiing, biking, hiking, scuba diving, and listening to classical music—especially opera.) She often speaks to faculty groups about maintaining balance in life. She also talks one-on-one with physicians who feel the need to get re-energized about their work—a sign of burnout, she says. “I have seen people who don’t have anything they can retire to because they didn’t plan it,” she says. “I have photography on my CV because I want to be a role model to faculty for having a plan when I retire.”

In her next chapter as a professional photographer, Sonnino plans to continue documenting the lives of her former patients. She says the relationships she’s formed with many of her charges and their families following surgery continue today. When Sonnino travels for meetings or conferences, she often reconnects with them. “I like to take pictures of what they look like now,” she says. “That’s fun,

and the families won't let you go."

Recently, she met and photographed a former patient, whose first photos she took after he had half a lung removed as a newborn; today, at 21 he is studying bassoon at The Julliard School. "What surprises me is that he has the lung capacity to play the bassoon professionally," she says, noting that her photos deliver "a very positive message."



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