



Sensitive surgeon with a story to tell

Roberta Sonnino's photographs relate course of disease and recovery

MASTERING THE ART AND SCIENCE OF MEDICINE MAY BE A BLURRED QUEST FOR SOME, BUT FOR ROBERTA SONNINO, MD, IT'S AS CLEAR AS THE LENS ON HER CAMERA. SONNINO, PROFESSOR and chief of pediatric surgery at the University of Kansas Medical Center, creatively combines her finely honed surgical skills with innate sensitivity and compassion to capture her small patients' compelling stories of disease and frequent recovery in photographs.

Whether it's the overwhelming impact of the tiny hand of a premature infant being cradled in a physician's palm or the touching interaction of a medical student with a patient in the neonatal intensive care unit, Sonnino never misses an opportunity to tell a story. Her camera travels in the pocket of her white coat to document the trials and triumphs of those she treats.

Fortunately, her successes far outweigh her defeats. Her third floor office in Delp Pavilion is testament to that, as it is filled with personal expressions of thanks from families, numerous awards and literally hundreds of photographs of children she has cared for throughout her career and during the five years she has been at KU Medical Center. "Taking care of children is a constant source of satisfaction," she says, unwaveringly. "When I treat a newborn on the day they are born with a major congenital anomaly that is incompatible with life, the fact is that they then have an 80-plus year lifespan ahead of them. That is an incredible source of satisfaction."

But the children aren't the only beneficiaries of Sonnino's care. She makes a practice of caring for their families as well. "I've been able to retain the human contact with my patients that is so important to me, and my patients and their families recognize that," she says. "It's not just that I have the skill to operate on their child and do the follow-up treatment, it's my interactions with the families that I will always be extraordinarily proud of. It brings together what I would like to see more of in medicine: being good at what you do and really establishing rapport."

She carries that message to the classroom, where she instructs medical students and residents, and shares her photographic accounts helping them to understand the course of disease and recovery with vivid imagery. Although she says the education of medical students is a constant challenge, she finds it gratifying because "they are the future of medi-

cine. If I know I've had even the slightest role in forming who they are in the future, I find that rewarding," she says.

A passionate personality and the need for immediate results steered Sonnino into surgery; a desire to care for children guided her to pediatrics. Born in New York City and raised in Italy, Sonnino graduated from the University of Padova, Italy, the oldest medical school in the world, established in 1222. She returned to the United States for medical training in pediatrics, general surgery and pediatric surgery, which consumed more than a decade. She also took time to conduct research into small bowel trans-

plantation, a field she still studies today. Her research is supported by the March of Dimes, which awarded her a \$187,000 grant.

Sonnino has worked diligently during her career and has become what is known in the medical field as a "triple threat" – adept at the bedside, at the research bench and in the classroom. Equally impressive, she has managed to mix her passion for pho-

tography with medicine and create a successful photography career on the side. Her operating room and patient photographs have been featured in a number of professional journals and Kansas City's Metro Medical Society has published several of her outdoor images on its journal cover.

In addition, she is the founding director of the Orr Academic Society, one of six academic societies at the medical school. She also founded and is the former director of the Women in Medicine program, now known as the Women in Medicine & Science program, at KUMC. She also served as associate dean for special programs.

Sonnino is justly proud of her accomplishments, particularly that she is a full professor of surgery, a demanding field many women physicians shy away from. She says that while women comprise 50 percent of medical school graduates, the number of women in surgical fields has decreased. "For my generation, there were significant obstacles and it continues to be extraordinarily difficult and often frustrating, but for women interested in a surgical career, I would advise them to do it," she says. "I would certainly make sure that they try to find a mentor – someone who can guide them through, because there's no one right way or easy way. Do what will make you professionally happy. It's been true for me. I would not have been happy in any other field." **Kleila Carlson**

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