

# In my own words

## GABI HOLLOWWS

While the 52-year-old remains committed to her late-husband Fred's work, she's a strong person who walks in her "own boots" and is loving life

### **Birthdays are important to me.**

I was born the week that Sir Edmund Hillary scaled Mount Everest [in May 1953] and I believe that was fate because Nepal has figured in my life ever since. The Hollows Foundation has two eye clinics and one of them is in Kathmandu – the other is in Asmara, Eritrea. The medical director at Tilganga Eye Centre in Nepal, Dr Sanduk Ruit, is godfather to my second daughter, Anna.

**I fell in love with my first ophthalmologist at the age of 18 months.** I had a squint as a little girl and wore big glasses until I had the first of several operations at the age of three. My ophthalmologist was a lovely man who always teased me about my scratched spectacles, and who taught me how one's eyes work.

**My life really didn't turn out the way I thought it would.** I grew up the youngest of three children in Newcastle [NSW]. Later, in Gosford, life was all paddocks, pony clubs and apple orchards. At 14, I fractured a leg falling off my horse and had to have physiotherapy. This led me to physiotherapy as my first career choice, with orthoptics as my second. But, by a series of coincidences, I found myself in a tiny terrace at the back of Woolloomooloo's Eye Hospital studying orthoptics.

**The first time I set eyes on Fred he was intimidating.** He gave me my first optics lecture [in 1971] and he was scary. We students tended to be on our toes around him. As Fred and I worked in small groups in the clinics over the months we got to know each other, but it took until late 1975 before we fell in love. Then, in early '76, Fred asked me to accompany him on his National Trachoma and Eye Health Program.

**I travelled all over Australia for three-and-a-half years with Fred.** We visited 420 Aboriginal communities and treated thousands. I saw so much of Australia and have beautiful memories. I was very privileged to be initiated into Aboriginal culture the way I was. Those years changed my life and the way I see things. In 1980, we returned to Sydney and got married.



### **I have seen a lot of developing countries and a lot of tragedy.**

I met the Russian cosmonaut Yelena Kondakova at a lunch in Sydney in the mid-'90s and I asked her what it was like to come down to earth after her flight. She replied that the world looked very small and peaceful and that she felt the human race would prosper if we simply all held hands and moved forward. I understood. I believe we are all the same and that we should all be nice to one another.

**Fred always used to say, just keep breathing.** When he was dying from cancer, his friend [Aboriginal boxer] Clarrie Grogan checked out of hospital to be with Fred. Clarrie would sit in the lounge room with Fred and whistle "One day at a time, Sweet Jesus" on a gum leaf. Fred fervently believed in just putting one foot in front of the other.

**Fred would have been blown away by what the Foundation has done since he died.** Six weeks after Fred died [on February 10, 1993], I went to Vietnam to make good on a promise Fred had made to train 300-plus doctors there in eye surgery. It was one of the hardest things I've done, but that's our Foundation's story: it just takes one smile or one word to make a person's day better.

**The Foundation still exists because the community is behind us.** We established the Foundation in 1992 and, by our 10th anniversary, more than one million eye operations had been performed. We now run programs in more than 30 countries; we're even pushing into North Korea. We don't care where people come from or about the politics. We're out there showing what can be done.

**Our girls are all named after strong, feisty women.** Fred's two children by his previous marriage are like my siblings and we had five of our own. Cam, now 23, is named after

**I don't feel like I live in Fred's shadow, and neither does John [Balazs, a lawyer].** I walk in my own boots and John is his own man. He's also a wonderful husband and father. Everywhere he goes he is reminded of Fred. There are even posters on bus shelters. But John never knew Fred: we met after Fred died. John's first wife died when Kate was only five. I sometimes wish I could meet Kate's mum just for five minutes.

**I've had black days when I've thought, "Crikey, what am I doing?"** The most important thing is that my kids are happy and healthy.

## FRED BELIEVED IN JUST PUTTING ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER

Donald Cam O' Sullivan, my Irish sea-captain great-grandfather. Emma, 21, is named after radical American feminist "Red Emma" Goldman, one of Fred's idols. Anna, 17, is named after Anna Louise Strong, the journalist and author who joined the Chinese Red Guards. Twins Ruth and Rosa, 15, are named after South African activist Ruth First and Polish socialist Rosa Luxembourg. Another daughter, Kate, is my second-husband John's daughter and she's the same age as the twins. We all live together.

I don't care what they do as long as they know they are loved. As for me, I want to be like a little old lady. I know who swims 365 days a year. She told me once that she knows she's alive because the water's so cold it takes her breath away. Like her, I am always grateful simply to be breathing and to be alive.

JOSEPHINE BROUARD

For further information about the Fred Hollows Foundation, log on to [www.hollows.org](http://www.hollows.org)