

Gates of Heaven

The wife of a software billionaire plans to wipe out hunger and disease in our time, and she may just do it. Michael Specter meets the passionate, private Mrs. Gates.

Photographed by Norman Jean Roy

Melinda French Gates may be the most ambitious woman on Earth; she certainly has some of the most profound ambitions. “We are trying to solve hunger in the world,” she says matter-of-factly when asked what she considers the principal goals of the world’s largest philanthropy, which she runs with her husband. “And, of course, disease.” Of course. It’s a simple idea, really, but also revolutionary. “We started this foundation with the premise that all lives are created equal. If an American child should be protected from measles”—not to mention polio, rotavirus, malaria, or any number of maladies that are common in the developing world yet forgotten in the United States—“then so should a child living in Zambia.”

That’s good news for the world, in part at least because Gates usually gets what she wants. She was raised in Dallas, the daughter of an engineer and a full-time mom who were both committed to community service. She was valedictorian at Ursuline Academy, an all-girls Catholic high school whose motto, aptly enough, was *Serviam* (“I will serve”). She whipped through Duke, and then its business school, in five years, studying economics and computers (both of which helped her land a job in 1987 at that young Seattle computer company Microsoft).

Melinda French arrived at Microsoft at the age of 22 and quickly made her mark, helping to develop such products as Encarta and Expedia, then running a division that produced several hundred million dollars in sales each year. “I loved working at Microsoft,” she tells me when I visit the foundation’s Seattle headquarters. “Loved it.” Yet, after marrying the boss—yes, *that* boss, Bill Gates—in 1994 and giving birth to their first child two years later, she decided to leave the company. “Bill was shocked. He said, ‘But you love your job so much, how can you do that?’ and I said, ‘Come on, Bill. I can’t work and have you with a full-time career and think this is a family.’ Which he got.”

So that ended her career at Microsoft; but four years later she and her husband started the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which, with assets currently hovering around \$35 billion, is not only the world’s largest (by a long shot) but its most effective as well. “Basically I am balancing two loves,” she told me. “The love of the work I do, what we hope to accomplish with the foundation, and the love of my kids. So now,” she concludes with a shrug and a smile, “I am a working mom.”

At 44, Melinda Gates is fully aware that there are many types of working moms and that she is the type that happens to be married to one of the richest men in the world. If the wealth, power, or anything else fazes her, it’s a remarkably well kept secret. Gates may be driven, but she is also utterly without pretense. When she says she wants to “solve” problems like hunger and disease, she knows she is asking the impossible of herself. She prefers it that way. “The great thing for us with the foundation is that we are here for the long haul,” she says. “So I can give it as much time or as little as I choose right now. But I get so drawn in, and I want to be such a huge part of it. . . . Yet I always have it in the back of my head that my kids are not going to be this age forever. My youngest child will be gone in twelve years,” she says. “My oldest will be gone in six years. That is the blink of an eye.”

Gates is a trim, athletic woman with luminous chestnut hair that falls freely to her shoulders. She has run marathons and climbed mountains, but one senses she considers such achievements too frivolous to dwell on. In fact, she is about as ostentatious and interested in self-promotion as her friend Warren Buffett. (The world’s richest man, Buffett pledged in 2006 to donate the bulk of his fortune to the Gates Foundation.) The morning we met she was dressed simply, in a brown suit and pumps. She wore unobtrusive earrings, a thin gold necklace, and a tasteful and restrained emerald-cut-diamond wedding ring (purchased at one of Buffett’s many properties, Borsheim’s Fine Jewelry in Omaha). “You have to be humble in what we are doing, but you also have to be bold,” she says. “You have to ask yourself, Are we going to feed people or sit behind ivory towers and argue about how to do it? I want people to live and to survive, so we will get out there and try something. If it doesn’t work, we will try something else. And we will keep trying until we find something that works.” The effect of those outsize goals is already evident. The Gates Foundation could accomplish little without its wealth, but the philanthropy’s true power lies in its willingness to apply the merciless principles of the business world to charity. If they can’t see how a project can eventually help solve one of the world’s most pressing problems, they won’t pay for it. “At the end of the day, Bill and Melinda care more about results than about feeling warm or fuzzy,” says Anthony S. Fauci, M.D., the director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases. “They are perfectly willing to gamble on a project, even if it ultimately fails. But they are not willing to give up on something they care deeply about.”

There won’t be any Gates Foundation grants for National Public Radio or the Metropolitan Opera. (For that matter, the foundation does not fund research into heart disease, diabetes, or many types of cancer, either, despite the fact that those diseases kill millions of people in the developing world. They also happen to kill millions of people in the developed world, and that means governments and pharmaceutical companies have all the incentive they need to address them.) Instead, Bill and Melinda Gates focus on problems that nobody else seems to care about. The results so far? The foundation has committed more than \$1.5 billion to help start and then support the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), a public-private partnership that helps developing countries purchase and deliver vaccines. The World Health Organization estimates that the GAVI Alliance has prevented 3.4 million deaths in the past eight years, delivered basic vaccines against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis to 50 million children, and provided enough support to immunize 200 million children against illnesses such as hepatitis B and yellow fever. Deaths from measles worldwide have fallen from 750,000 a year in 2005 to 250,000 last year. Recently the foundation funded a malaria-prevention project in Zambia that cut the death rate there in half.

Those are only intermediary goals. The most powerful killers in the developing world—AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis—are constantly on the founders’ minds. “I do think about what we would want people to say that the foundation accomplished in my lifetime,” Gates says. “Are we working on the things that people will look back and say, ‘Wow, they really did tackle the biggest concerns for the world?’ But I don’t think about it on a daily or even yearly basis. It would just be too heavy,” she says. “Of course we talk about eliminating AIDS and malaria. We know how hard that is going to be, but we are not daunted.”

The first time I met Melinda Gates she was with her husband, and we were talking about how to contain AIDS in India and Africa. He was voluble and animated (to say the least); she was not. I quickly formed the common but intensely misguided impression that the Gates Foundation was one of his enthusiasms and that she was there as a loyal helpmate. But without Melinda there would have been no Gates Foundation. She is the reason they focus so heavily on improving the health of the world’s neediest inhabitants. (They also spend billions of dollars on other projects, most noticeably attempting to fix the dangerously broken American high school system, which both say they often consider a challenge at least as great as curing AIDS or malaria.)

Just before they were married, Gates’s mother wrote a letter to Melinda, stressing the rare opportunity the couple would have to deploy their wealth to change the world. The two had always planned (and still plan) to give all their money away, but Bill had originally assumed he would begin to do that when he was much older. Melinda changed the program. Bill was interested in population control and wondered if improvements in global public health would only make the world more crowded, since healthier people live longer. They quickly learned, however, that healthier people are also wealthier and that they have fewer children and are in a better position to improve their lives. “I read a story that said millions of children were dying from diarrhea every year,” Gates says, her eyes widening as if this had happened three weeks ago. “Diarrhea. Every day thousands of children dying of diarrhea. And I thought, No, that isn’t possible. The more we looked, the harder it was to understand why something more had not been done.”

Bill and Melinda Gates live with their three children (two daughters, aged twelve and six, and a nine-year-old son) in an enormous mansion on the shores of Lake Washington that Gates began building long before he was even married. They are both deeply protective of their children’s privacy but do as much as possible, given the need for a certain amount of security, to ensure that they grow up normally. “It is essential to them that those kids have as regular a childhood as possible,” says Melinda’s brother Raymond French. “They go to parks, have playdates and sleep-overs. Melinda is fierce about this. There will be no bubble for them; these children will not turn out to be Paris Hilton.” Still, being a Microsoft child does carry unusual burdens. “There are very few things that are on the banned list in our household,” Gates tells me. “But iPods and iPhones are two things we don’t get for our kids.” Harsh, perhaps, but understandable. After all, it’s hard to walk around tethered to merchandise made by your father’s most famous competitor. Still, Gates acknowledges the inevitable lure of forbidden fruit. “Every now and then I look at my friends and say, ‘Ooh, I wouldn’t mind having that iPhone.’”

Raymond French is six years younger than Melinda and lives in Denver. He was still in high school when his sister went to work for Microsoft. “One year she got this really nice Christmas gift from some guy named William,” he recalls. “I didn’t give it much thought. A little while later Mom and Dad sat me and my little brother down and said, ‘We want you to know that Bill Gates is coming to town, and you are going to meet him because he has been dating Melinda for several months.’ I said, ‘No way—just no way.’ But my brother—who is four years younger than me—looked over and said, ‘Who is Bill Gates?’” Melinda and Bill Gates exchange scores of E-mails every week (even every day) with each other and their staff. “You should see my in-box from just this weekend,” she says one Monday morning. Robert Christen, who oversees the foundation’s newest area of interest, the effort to provide affordable financial services for people in the developing world, told me that he recently sent the Gateses a 100-page project proposal. “When they came in to talk about it, they had notes on every page,” he said. That level of intensity made me wonder if the Gates family ever escaped the office. “Absolutely,” Melinda says. “I call it closing the doors. Literally. When we leave for holidays, we often go to someplace completely remote. We have no E-mail; we don’t check voice mail. We unplug completely.”

“We take a lot of long walks on beaches because we like to go to sunny locales. And we are talking about fertilizer and malaria and deaths of women in the developing world.” Perhaps not the most common vacation chatter, but they are an unusual couple. “Bill and Melinda are major geeks,” Patty Stonesifer, who helped start the foundation and just retired as its chief executive, told me once, approvingly. Stonesifer is close to both founders, and for her, geekiness is next to, or possibly even ahead of, godliness.

A new chapter in their lives began last June, when Bill Gates retired as chairman of the company he invented. They have each begun to devote more time to the foundation, and the rhythm of their relationship has begun to change as well. Normally, they take two fact-finding trips together each year—usually to Africa or Asia. “We do more separately,” Gates says, “because we can get more bang for our buck. But we love to travel together.” This year they will have to start spending huge amounts of Warren Buffett’s money, which will require them roughly to double annual expenditures to \$3 billion. Melinda has become immersed in the financial-services issue, which she sees as an essential prelude to providing security and equality for women in the Third World. Recently, the foundation helped finance a pilot project in Malawi that deploys thumb readers and smart cards to help women save money. Until now they had no real way to do it. “When a woman’s husband dies of AIDS in Malawi, she becomes the property of her brother-in-law,” Gates explains. “And he goes to collect all the assets. But they belong to her, and if she has the smart card, he will take it to the bank and demand the money. But the bank will say, ‘This is not your card; it’s not your account, because it’s not your thumbprint.’ He can’t get her money. And these cards,” she adds triumphantly, “have become so popular that they are the number-one wedding gift in the country.”

There is a standard view of Bill and Melinda Gates: She is warm, and he is consumed by data. Lately, they have begun to edge into each other’s territory. “I hope that one of the things about a great marriage is that you bring out the best in each other,” she says. “Look, I dated Bill for a long time before we got married, and I knew where his heart was. But I also knew that not many people saw it. The wall would go up the minute he stepped into Microsoft. Sometimes he would come into the foundation with the wall up. I would even tease him about it. He would be talking to me in the car, and by the time we got to the elevator I would be like, *Whoa*, where did he go?”

Their offices are connected by a set of French doors. Melinda was, for a while, worried about all that togetherness. "Last year he wasn't around much. And I wondered what it would be like when he was. But there is a lightness to it now," she says, referring to both their marriage and their shared mission. "It's quite a responsibility, but there is this unbelievable joy to it."

"Gates of Heaven" has been edited for Vogue.com; the complete story appears in the March 2009 issue of *Vogue*.