

A TRIBUTE TO DAVID NEWBERRY: FATHER OF THE CORE GROUP POLIO PROJECT (CGPP)



FEBRUARY 9, 1934 – AUGUST 4, 2020

After making his mark on the eradication of smallpox and guinea worm, [David Newberry](#) embraced the challenge to defeat polio. In 1999, David became the first director of the CORE Group Polio Project. He was the driving force behind engaging civil society, particularly the non-governmental organization community, by launching community-based polio eradication efforts through the development of Secretariat teams in Angola, India, Ethiopia, Uganda, Bangladesh and Nepal. Even after officially leaving the project, David returned to continue steering the formation of project teams in South Sudan and Nigeria.

David had a wealth of more than 40 years of public health experience, having worked at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and CARE, including in smallpox and guinea worm eradication programs besides his monumental work in community-based polio eradication.

David traveled to the polio-priority countries of Angola, India, Ethiopia, Uganda, Bangladesh and Nepal, assessing the need and feasibility of developing CGPP programs there. The CORE Group and USAID had earlier established guiding principles for the project to ensure that NGOs would work cooperatively in high-risk locations that would most benefit from the CGPP's engagement. "He was enthusiastic and optimistic but saw things for what they were, and he didn't hesitate to confront problems head on," said Ellyn Ogden, USAID Worldwide Polio Eradication Coordinator and the original architect of the CGPP and the Secretariat Model. "He pulled this together and got us over the initial bumps when everybody was skeptical that the project had merit."



Added Roma Solomon, the CGPP India Secretariat Director: "David did not bear any ill will towards anyone and if I got frustrated with somebody in the project and write a 'not so nice' mail, he would apologise on my behalf, saying *mea culpa*. Every time he did that, I would offer or threaten to resign! I was new to the game but he was a veteran and was determined to succeed come what may. And by doing that he put CGPP on the right track."



David was a dear friend to many in far-reaching corners of the globe. He will be remembered for his charismatic leadership, inspiring mentorship and his outsized wit, charm and humor.

The following memories and stories were submitted to the CGPP to honor David's many contributions to polio and beyond. The tributes were compiled by Lydia Bologna, the CGPP's communication technical advisor at Lydia.cgpp@gmail.com

Top photo: The CGPP India office opening in 2000.

Left photo: David attends the wedding of Roma's son in 2018.

Bottom photo: Gretchen and David



"There are thousands of children that are alive today and particularly are not paralyzed for life, because of David's life"

David Newberry was one of the smallpox warriors and helped spearhead the CDC's successful global Smallpox Eradication Effort, responsible for the planning, coordination and evaluation of the smallpox eradication program. While at the CDC he also developed programs in T.B, Influenza and Diarrheal disease control as well as for Child Survival. As CARE's Senior Public Health Advisor, David provided leadership and strategic guidance for primary health care work all over the world. In 1999, he joined as the first director of the CORE Group Polio Project, a USAID-initiated consortium of development agencies spearheading efforts around the world to assist governments through Civil Society Organisations.

As a fluent Hausa speaker, David spent countless months, trips and miles working with the vast communities of northern Nigeria in getting polio down to a few handfuls of cases. He had a special affection towards Nigeria and took on an assignment with CDC to return in 2012 to support polio surveillance and SIAs. Again in 2014 he came back on a challenging mission to establish the CORE Group Polio Project in Nigeria.

Even in his late 70's David spent enormous time and effort visiting small community leaders in Northern Nigeria who had heard a rumour that polio vaccine caused AIDS or male infertility. David was instrumental in getting Indonesia, a fellow Islamic nation, to manufacture the polio vaccine for Nigeria to remedy these concerns and move the dream of eradication within sight of completion.

David was a deeply committed believer with tremendous compassion and empathy for the poor. As a mentor to many around the world, his cross-cultural insights and approach to working with governments and local community leaders were valuable lessons. There are thousands of children that are alive today and particularly are not paralyzed for life, because of David's life. His contribution to the polio eradication in Nigeria is worth a mention in the history of country's fight against polio.



Roma Solomon, CGPP India Secretariat Director. Roma's tribute includes references mentioned in a Facebook posting by David's dear friend Alan Robbins.



In this photo dated August 2012, David meets with key stakeholders in Kaduna, Nigeria in an effort to start the CORE Group Partners Project in Nigeria. In his first blog report to USAID, David writes:

"The initial steps included appeals to the Muslim communities and leadership to accept and communicate to their people the fact that the OPV antigen was safe to take and would not produce ill effects and was acceptable. There was and is serious consideration for utilizing traditional and religious leaders, increasing political will, NGOs, improved social mobilization, establish the actual number of zero dose children and special target focus on any LGA with continued high-risk populations and polio cases. Improved (activities) were aimed at hard to reach, high risk populations and areas hard to reach, low coverage areas, and quantifiable coverage of house-to-house OPV administration and appropriate social mobilization."

The CGPP is very grateful to David's contribution to Nigeria's polio-free certification on August 21, 2019.

On August 25, 2020, the Africa Regional Certification Committee (ARCC) will certify the African Region free from endemic polio, leaving only Pakistan and Afghanistan as the two remaining countries with Wild Polio Virus cases.

“I Remember David Newberry” by Ellyn Ogden

David would start his emails with “Dear Polio Fighter”. It said a lot about David – he made you feel cared for, of being comrades in arms against a virus he despised, and an uplifting but determined mood for whatever would come next.

David transformed a dream of mine into reality. Nearly 25 years ago, we envisioned a network of community-based NGOs banding together to help the world eradicate polio. David made this happen. He brought his vast experience from smallpox eradication, his knowledge of science and disease control together with his self-deprecating humor, ability to cajole and persuade, and innate humbleness. The result was the CORE Group Polio Project. He became its first Director. The networks he created in multiple countries have helped vaccinate millions of children, established community-based surveillance systems in the most remote and difficult areas and promoted health for all wherever he went. Tens of thousands of health workers and volunteers are now trained and actively eradicating polio and controlling other diseases. Of the 7 country programs David set up – all have eradicated wild polio virus. It is said in polio circles that without the added boost from NGOs in hard-to-reach areas, it was uncertain if eradication could be achieved.

David’s insights were spot on and his advice inspired you to do more. In one email he sent me he said “If we are not willing to analyze security conditions with an open perspective and are looking for a 100% assurance of safety then we should not even attempt polio eradication in Nigeria” Further on he says “I have carefully traveled the path of these high risk workers and so I add my opinion with that of others. I know that the Catholic PVOs are working in these high-risk areas and they are working with Muslim brothers and sisters even in Borno. We should listen to what they are doing and assess all known threats to violence in the spirit of willingness to succeed where others are working effectively BUT not without risk ”

He was sometimes frustrated with the process but forever optimistic that we could conquer the virus. He wrote me “... let’s start field negotiations with the real frontline polio fighters. Ellyn, this must include a serious political and power struggle! We are nine months late ... so true to life when get approval we will be overcoming the time warp - But never fear Hans Solo will rescue the princesses and beat the enemy.”



CGPP Nigeria Secretariat Samuel Usman and David

David had a way of making his successes everyone’s successes. He valued teamwork, fearlessness, and humility. He would often conclude a trip report with “Sorry for any mistakes including those of commission and also omission - any and all mistakes are my own and successes belong to the team.” I will miss his emails that often ended with lines like: “Say a prayer. Light a candle and do a good deed!”

"Your servant." And my favorite, "Congratulations on your life mission and professional conquest of polio eradication! Ellen Coates and I will be ready to write our nomination to the Nobel Prize folks any day!"

David once sent me a story, that I think captures his humanity and good heart.

The Moral: We will not be remembered by our words, but by our kind deeds. Life is not measured by the breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath.

Today I wish you a day of ordinary miracles
~

A fresh pot of coffee you didn't make yourself...

An unexpected phone call from an old friend....

Green traffic lights when you drive....

The fastest line at the grocery store....

Your keys found right where you left them.

Send this to the people you'll never forget. I just did If you don't send it to anyone, it means you are in way too much of a hurry to even notice the ordinary miracles when they occur.



21/08/2009

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU GATHER, BUT WHAT YOU SCATTER THAT TELLS WHAT KIND OF LIFE YOU HAVE LIVED!

My dear friend, you have scattered so much good into the world and it is a far better place because of you. Ellyn Ogden



"I have hundreds of stories to tell about David"

I worked closely with David for about 10 years, with the PVO Child Survival Support Program and the Core Group Polio Partners Project. I have hundreds of stories to tell about David---probably more than about any other person I know---as working with David leads to story after story... from his time in the Army as an infantryman on the frontlines in the Korean War, during smallpox eradication, through to the ones we made together. I could write a small book of stories with time and share one below.

As was common when working with David, he was in Nigeria while the rest of the team was back in the States. If I remember correctly, he was providing technical assistance to the Africare Child Survival project in Adamawa State. While traveling around the project site, he thought he recognized a mountain to the east. The mountain was on the border with Cameroon and while it looked familiar, he could not be sure because he had only seen it before from the Cameroon side, and Adamawa has a very long border with Cameroon. He had seen a similar mountain while visiting his daughter and family who were living in Cameroon near the Nigerian border. At some point during the Adamawa trip, probably a weekend, he took the chance. He walked to and crossed the border and hiked over that mountain. He found his daughter's home and was able to sneak up on the house without being seen. Do you think David meekly announced his presence? As he told me the story, he banged as hard and loud as he could on the metal front door to announce his presence. He told me it gave the family quite a fright, as a loud bang on the door in that part of W Africa might mean many things and was not local custom. I am not sure how much time he spent with the family (several hours? A night?), but when he was done, he marched himself back over the mountain and back to work.



David was very proud of his Cherokee descent. David's Facebook profile photo shared by Anne-Reneé Heningburg, Lead Public Health Advisor Global Immunization Division, CGH, CDC

But most important, in all of this, we might see that David truly had the "*confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*" (Hebrews 11:1).

My sympathies to Gretchen and to David's family, especially Jaime whom I got to know when visiting Atlanta. **Bill Weiss**

This story reveals much about David. He was comfortable in nature, as his years of hunting, fishing and his Cherokee heritage can also attest to. He was comfortable in W. Africa where he worked on smallpox, child survival, and the eradication of both guinea worm and polio. He was generous with his time--he could have used that weekend to sleep in, rest up and keep out the heat. Instead, seeing family was worth risking an unofficial border crossing on foot, hiking up and over a mountain in the African heat, through terrain he did not know for sure was the right place, and then making the return. His sense of humor shines when he took the opportunity to make his presence known at the house a surprise event (like jumping out and shouting Boo!).

"He was an outstanding leader who used to inspire and encourage his teams."

The sad news about the sudden demise of David was very shocking to me. Though he was not well for some time but never thought that so soon he will take an exit. My association with David began in 2004 when I joined the CORE Group Polio project India. In the same year, we met in India. Very soon, we developed a solid bond between each other. I think whoever came in contact with David remained with him because of his loving nature. Even after he retired from our project, we continued to meet with each other. In June 2011, we were together in first-ever CGPP summit and Global Health Council in Washington, D.C. In September 2012, I was in Nigeria for short assignment with UNICEF, and to my surprise, he was there on CDC assignment. He came to my hotel in Abuja to have dinner, taking security risk!



Jitendra and David

In January of 2015, I was lucky to visit him and see his home cum museum in Atlanta. He was thrilled to show me different articles and souvenirs he had collected from around the world. In 2017 again we met at Atlanta, this time he was with Gretchen. Last we met in 2018 in India. The reason I am giving all the details of my meetings with David is that in professional life we hardly meet people once we leave that organization, but David and I continue to meet and refresh our memories, strengthen our relations. Every interaction with him was a lesson about global health. He had tremendous experience in smallpox eradication, guinea worm eradication, child survival programs and polio eradication. He had travelled to many countries and was well acquainted with local cultures and practices. He was an outstanding leader who used to inspire and encourage his teams. He never had any grudge against anyone. Always ready to help people. He was very proud of his work. The network of his friends and well-wishers is spread in many countries. I will miss him all the time.

My prayers are with Gretchen and all his family.

**Jitendra Awale, CGPP India Secretariat
Deputy Director**



“A charismatic visionary”

I had the good fortune to first meet David working for CARE in the nineties and later worked closely with him as my supervisor on the CORE Group Polio Project starting in 1999. He was a charismatic visionary with a contagious enthusiasm for disease eradication. He had a wealth of stories about working on Smallpox eradication in Nigeria in the sixties and he was a very charming and supportive supervisor with a delightful sense of humor. His vision and leadership helped to design and launch the CORE Group Polio Project which had a significant impact on polio eradication in various countries. I always enjoyed his project visits to Angola which were wonderful opportunities to learn from David and laugh at his great stories. He will be greatly missed.

Lee Losey, Global Deputy Director, CORE Group Polio Project



David launches the South Sudan Secretariat in 1999.

The Global Health Chronicles interviews David

This is an excerpt from an oral interview with David Newberry held on July 13, 2006 at the CDC in Atlanta. David addresses his role to eradicate smallpox in Ghana in the 1960s. This interview was published in CDC's and Emory University's The Global Health Chronicles. Two brief excerpts below focus on David's polio work in Nigeria. The full interview was retrieved from: [globalhealthchronicles.com](https://www.globalhealthchronicles.com).

“And what we did, is we used a holistic approach. We went to the emirs (in Nigeria). Each emir has his own chancellor for health, his own government, his own courts, his own religious leaders, and so we went up as an extra pair of hands. And I always made a point to go ... You tell me where the toughest place to go to and get to is, and that's where I would go. I wouldn't care how tough it would be because that was the challenge. If I'm going to be there, then I want to show everybody that there's no place I won't go, there's nothing I won't do to get rid of this disease.”

“We also learned that, as far as the legacy, it should be complimentary. For instance, in India, we hold health fairs, so we're de-worming kids as well as addressing adult needs. We're looking at anemia, and we have these little health camps when we do immunization programs. And, again, it's kind of a holistic thing. I'd like to see this continue. So I think the idea of leaving a legacy is one of the things that we've been able to apply.”

Diallo, Melissa McSwegin (Interviewer); Rollins School of Public Health; Graduate Student and Newberry, David (Interviewee); CDC; Operations Officer, “NEWBERRY, DAVID,” The Global Health Chronicles, accessed August 12, 2020, <https://www.globalhealthchronicles.org/items/show/3497>.

"He will always have a special place in my memories"

David was an innovator, a new idea creator, and the father of CORE Group Polio Project. He traveled to many countries to meet and discuss with partners to get PVOs to host secretariat offices. He started the project with one country and later expanded to five countries.

His management was simple, friendly, and encouraging to innovate new ideas. He believed in a decentralized type of management. Even after he left the project, he contributed to establishing the CGPP secretariats in South Sudan and Nigeria. He was involved in smallpox eradication and was devoted and dreamt of seeing polio eradicated from the world, and to no longer see death and disabled children because of polio.

We spent one month together at the Legacy Center Leadership workshop in Morrisville, North Carolina in 2008. I learned from his dedication to work up until the end of life - listening carefully and appreciating ideas. He was my role model and I practice what I learned from him.

For me, he was a father who advised me how to handle life; as a boss, he taught me how to plan and work to eradicate diseases; as a colleague, we shared professional experiences, especially field epidemiology; and as a friend, we enjoyed laughing and joking.

He will always have a special place in my memories. May the good Lord give him eternal rest and the family the strength they need through this difficult time.

Filimona Bisrat, CGPP Ethiopia Secretariat Director



Filimona and David



Dear David's Family!

We are deeply saddened to hear David's death, and we want to express our most sincere sympathies to the family during this difficult time from the Secretariat team of the Horn of Africa CORE Group Polio Project. David was a highly valuable and respected leader of the polio eradication initiative, and the effects of his passing will give us the impetus to finish the work he has started to wipe polio from the face of the earth.

I had the privilege of meeting him and reading his extensive work on polio eradication; we continue to utilize his expertise and guidance on the polio eradication initiative in high-risk, hard-to-reach underserved communities.

On behalf of the Secretariat team, please accept our sincere condolences. He will be greatly missed, and his death saddens everyone here. Know that our thoughts and prayers are with the family, friends, and colleagues during this difficult time.

Below is a memorable photo when I joined him and colleagues during the CORE Group 20th Anniversary Gala at Marriott Baltimore Waterfront on September 28, 2017.

With sincere sympathy,

Ahmed Arale,

Secretariat Director, Horn of Africa CORE Group Polio Project
Nairobi, Kenya



"He was patient, kind, funny, and an incredible mentor"

I met David Newberry around 1990. Drs. Warren and Gretchen Berggren had the brilliant idea to hire David to teach all the Save the Children Health Unit staff epidemiology so that we would better understand the critical importance of data in public health outcomes. David used the 2-week CDC Epidemiology Course spanned out over a 6 - 8-week period, working with the group and with each of us individually. He was patient, kind, funny, and an incredible mentor. And then our paths crossed again when I became the Director of the CORE Group and David was the Director of the CORE Group Polio Project. David was humble, energetic, insightful, and had a gift for putting people at ease. His strategic vision for inter-NGO and government collaboration and partnership was brilliant; and he had the right personality to entice NGO partners to collaborate together and to use a common set of indicators for their polio eradication work. His public health stature and former CDC work gave the NGOs credibility with other polio internationally focused partners and national governments. He traveled tirelessly, mentored so many young professionals, and yet remained available to give advice when asked, and to listen to what was happening on the ground. David was a great man, friend to many, and will be very missed. [**Karen LeBan, Former CORE Group Executive Director/ Global Health Consultant**](#)

"Always had a winning smile and a positive attitude, whatever the quest"

I knew David during the West and Central African smallpox-measles program during the late 1960s. David was based in Ghana And I in Guinea. He emerged as one of the most successful operations officers in the entire program. A superb manager, excellent in public relations as well as in epidemiology and public health.

Always had a winning smile and a positive attitude, whatever the quest-and David had many. It was a pleasure to know him. My deep condolences to the family.

[**Joel Breman, NIH**](#)



"His generosity was legendary"

David Newberry was truly extraordinary person. My first professional mentor, the godfather to my children and a fearless leader forever, he taught me more than I can say about what to do as a public health practitioner and how to live as a human being. His generosity was legendary. To convince a colleague of the seriousness of the CORE partners' commitment to polio eradication, he gave the man the necktie from around his neck, surely only because he couldn't very well literally peel the shirt off his back right there in the South Sudanese Ministry of Health meeting room. His sense of humor was buoyant and infectious (if quirky at times). In my first professional job ever, here I had this august CDC veteran smallpox hero tell me a basic tenet of our new polio fighting team was "A thing isn't worth doing if you can't have a little fun along the way." (I've passed that maxim down to my children.) Most of all his belief in people was transformative in so many lives, from my own to those of literally thousands of community health workers around the world. He genuinely believed in the potential of people and committed himself wholly to supporting everyone around him realize that potential without expecting for himself a shred of credit for anything a group accomplished. My deepest sympathies go out to his family for this loss, and I know he will be remembered, respected, and honored quite literally around the world.

Dora Ward Curry, CARE

"The world is a better place"

I vividly remember meeting David for the first time around 1993 or 1994 when he was working with Dory Storms in the Child Survival Support Program Office at Johns Hopkins. I quickly learned that David was not your normal human being when he blithely told me that at 5pm on Fridays he got in his car and drove all night to Atlanta to see his family. Then, somehow, he got back in his car at 5pm on Sunday and drove all night to be able to begin work in Baltimore first thing on Monday morning.

How he did that, I will never know. But how he did so many other amazing things in his long career of "shoe-leather" epidemiology and of inspiring others to follow in his footsteps will also remain a mystery as well. The CORE Group Polio Project is but one of many legacies that David contributed to, and the world is a better place because of his hard work and dedication to the most vulnerable among us.

Henry Perry
Senior Scientist, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health



Dear Polio Fighter,

From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you David for all you have done to truly make this world a better place.

With sincere gratitude, Your CGPP Fan Club

