

Beyond Office and O.R.

It beats annihilation

Can a quiet family practitioner from McKeesport influence international events in a world that sometimes seems out of control?

Talk with him for a few minutes and you'll begin to believe it's possible.

The man is Barry Farkas, and his goal — which he describes with a combination of



Barry Farkas at the Hiroshima memorial; the first atomic bomb exploded on August 6, 1945; 70,000 people died instantly.

reason, humor, and passion — is the elimination of nuclear weapons. Barry Farkas isn't working alone; he is a member of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), a ten-year-old group that won the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize, and of Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), an organization begun in the 1960s. "The two organizations don't have unified membership, but they do have overlapping appeal," says Barry Farkas.

Barry's interest in international matters stems from his days as a student at Ohio's Antioch College. As part of Antioch's work/study program, Barry traveled to, and worked in, Colombia and Kenya, where he

met his wife (and partner in their White Oak family practice), Fariel Rawji. Later, as a Pitt medical student, he worked in India.

Today, Barry Farkas is — although he will deny it — something of an expert on international affairs. And he's passionate about the threat to the world posed by nuclear weapons.

For the First Time: Annihilation

"On August 6, 1945, the day Hiroshima was bombed, things changed," he says.

"Before then, individuals knew they would die, and knew that perhaps even whole communities could disappear in a calamity. But never for an instant did human beings believe that the species would not continue. Now, for the first time, we've had to contemplate the annihilation not just of ourselves and our species but of the whole biosphere. That's a terrifying thought — and a very real possibility."

It's against that possibility that IPPNW and PSR work. Both organizations say that nuclear "war" is a misnomer since a single nuclear exchange could essentially destroy the earth. And both organizations believe that physicians have a unique perspective on the nuclear arms issue. Says Barry Farkas, "As doctors, we're experts on health, and this is a public health issue of the first rank. Recent research has confirmed what many people have already intuited: there is no medical response to a nuclear exchange. The only prescription is prevention."

This fall, Barry took part in IPPNW's Ninth World Conference, held in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "We had about 3,000 people from 76 countries," he reports. "We reaffirmed IPPNW's major goals — the adoption of a comprehensive nuclear test ban, the reduction of current stockpiles (there are 60,000 nuclear warheads in the world today), and the cessation of development of new weapons. And we adopted some new, related goals — for instance, we need to look at what plutonium plants are doing to the people near them and at the whole issue of nuclear waste disposal."

by
Susan Cosgrove



The remains of a building at the hypocenter of the Hiroshima explosion; the bomb exploded 500 meters above it. This is the only building in the area to survive, even in part.

Leftover Peaceniks?

Are Barry Farkas and his colleagues in IPPNW and PSR hippies — or leftover Vietnam-era peaceniks? Barry answers with a grin: “No; in fact, I’m more the button-down type. But you have to look at truth wherever it lies.

“And we’re certainly not ‘peaceniks,’” he continues. “We’re not advocating unilateral disarmament. IPPNW was founded by an American and a Soviet, and our goal is bilateral nuclear disarmament with mutually agreeable verification. We’re not even hoping to eliminate all war; that would be far too big an agenda. We just want to remove the nuclear threat — the Damoclean sword — so we can stay alive to agree to disagree. Even if that disagreement took the form of conventional war, that would still be preferable to annihilation.”

What about a “Star Wars” defense — couldn’t that protect us from a nuclear attack and thereby reduce the perceived danger? “Not even the top experts in our own government believe that’s possible,” counters Barry Farkas.

Well, then, what about the Qaddafi of the world? If the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. disarm, aren’t we giving a clear field to terrorist countries who want to develop nuclear capabilities? “Not if we do it right,” says Barry. “In IPPNW and PSR, we advocate a worldwide ban on nuclear weapons, cooperative intelligence-gathering — and swift, sure enforcement. If that’s done well, the Qaddafi types couldn’t succeed.”

Logic of the Heart

Barry Farkas clearly believes he has logic on his side — but it’s the logic of the heart as well as of the mind that moves him to work for nuclear disarmament. “I have three children — Adam, Sarah, and David,” he says. “And as a father, I get angry that they should grow up in a world where their very futures are at stake.”

Then he quotes results of recent research in which youngsters six to 16 years old were interviewed about nuclear weapons. “It’s an adult fiction to think that kids aren’t concerned,” he says with some asperity. “The research shows — for instance — that 42 percent of American children think that nuclear war will happen in their lifetime . . . and most believe they’ll perish in it.”

Other studies, he says, show that, among American children aged 12 to 18, the three

greatest worries are the death of a parent, nuclear war, and poor grades. Among Soviet teens, the three greatest fears are nuclear war, the death of a parent, and world hunger.

Do groups like IPPNW and PSR have a chance of success? Barry says recent history shows they do: “In the mid-1980s, IPPNW’s co-founders, Boston cardiologist Bernard Lown and Soviet Health Minister Evgueni Chazov, together persuaded Mikhail Gorbachev to impose an 18-month unilateral ban on nuclear testing,” he recalls. “Soviet testing wasn’t resumed until the U.S. exploded a nuclear device underground.”

That kind of track record — plus the legitimizing influence of the Nobel Peace Prize, constant lobbying efforts, and individual members’ work to convince colleagues, friends, and the public about the merit of the cause — just might work, Barry believes.

An Einstein Quote — and a Bias Toward Hope

In a conversation he has sprinkled with quotes from Groucho, Gandhi, and Frost, he ends with a thought from Einstein: “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything

save our modes of thinking, and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophes.”

“We can’t let that happen, and I have to believe we won’t. My bias is toward hope,” says Barry Farkas. “But I wouldn’t want to count on someone else doing the work. In this world, you choose your issues . . . and this is where I’ve chosen to take a stand.”



At the Ninth World Congress of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War: IPPNW Co-Presidents (left) Mikhail Kuzin, M.D. (Director of the Surgical Clinic of the First Moscow Medical School) and (right) Bernard Lown, M.D., Professor of Cardiology, Harvard School of Public Health. Bernard Lown is also co-founder of IPPNW.

Beyond Office and O.R. is a periodic feature about members’ vocations. Contact BULLETIN staff to tell us about yours!