

Annabel's mission to save lives

An estimated eight million children world-wide suffer from heart defects and a million will die in the first year of life. Sheena Grant speaks to a Suffolk-born humanitarian trying to improve the survival chances of some of the world's poorest people

IT'S 30 years since a 19-year-old Annabel Green-Lavielle said goodbye to her native Suffolk and set off with just a suitcase for her first job in Paris.

She still thinks of the county as home but in those three decades she has travelled a long way – literally and metaphorically.

Today she is living with her French husband and three daughters in San Francisco and last month launched an online organisation called the Global Heart Network, which she hopes will help save the lives of thousands of people with heart defects – many of them children – in the developing world.

It's a very personal crusade for Annabel, who grew up in a farming family at Badingham.

Her daughter, Elise, had to undergo open heart surgery at just six months old.

"It was very hard for Elise and for us as a family," says Annabel. "Later we became host family on two occasions to two children who came to Paris from their home countries – Morocco and Senegal – for open heart surgery. It was our way of giving back. However hard it was for Elise to suffer from congenital heart disease, we realised we were lucky to live in a country where Elise had such fantastic care.

"Elise is now a beautiful 17-year-old and about to finish high school."

Last month's launch of the Global Heart Network – which aims to connect patients with doctors in the West so that life-saving surgery can happen speedily – is the culmination of Annabel's life experiences, but at the root of it all is the inspiration provided by Elise.

"It is a complete journey," she says. "It started with our own difficult family health issues, [went on] to looking after Mohammed and Cheikhou (the boys from Morocco and Senegal) and then my decision to work in the field of global health."

Little could Annabel have known, growing up in rural Suffolk, of the route her life would take as a mother, business entrepreneur and healthcare visionary.

After setting out for Paris as a teenager she met and married Philippe Lavielle and founded a company called Corporate Relocations, providing services to human resources departments for their expatriate staff. The company grew rapidly and was sold to Prudential in 2001.

Shortly afterwards, she gained a masters degree in humanitarian action, which led her to work with several voluntary organisations in France.

Then in 2007 Annabel, Philippe and their three daughters – Lucy, Nelly and Elise – moved to San Francisco with his work in the biotech industry. Annabel returned to studying and graduated with a masters in non-profit



PERSONAL CRUSADE: Annabel Green-Lavielle and her family with Cheikhou, one of the African children with a heart condition they hosted during treatment in Paris

administration from the University of San Francisco.

The seeds of the Global Heart Network were sown when she met Professor Afksendiyos Kalangos, head of cardiology at the University Hospital of Geneva.

"When I came to San Francisco, and started studying, my thesis was about voluntary organisations working in the field of cardiac care in low and middle income countries," she says. "I was shocked by the lack of collaboration in an area where there was so much need.

"One thing led to another and Professor Kalangos recognised my work, invited me to present at his humanitarian forum in Geneva and provided initial funds to start the (Global Heart Network)."

Annabel is conscious that she's achieved

something most people could only ever dream of: to identify a problem that affects so many and be able to do something tangible to change it.

"I was lucky enough to spend time on a detailed evaluation in the context of my studies and then to meet people – in particular Professor Kalangos, who is my mentor and drive," she says. "I feel so honoured to have the opportunity of his counsel to move this project forward.

"I suppose I have a drive mixed with a determination that started as a mother who confronted heart disease, the empathy of other parents and the true appreciation of living in a country where we had access to care. I also have the full support of Philippe, and my daughters, now aged 21, 19 and 17, who contribute and egg me on." And although they are a vast distance

away, Annabel knows she also has the support of her family and friends back home in Suffolk.

Her father, Bill Green, who founded the Framlingham Farmers co-operative, died in 1996 but her mother, Chris, still looks after the family farm, with the help of a manager.

"East Anglia is where my strong roots are," she says. "I still have family and friend connections and always return at least once a year. I feel lucky to have such strong roots that form the basis of my identity and glad that although my children have not lived in Suffolk they return to see their family every summer."

Professor Kalangos is chairman of the Global Heart Network's board of directors and the vice president is Essex-based Dr Hakim Yadi.

"Another East Anglian link," says Annabel. The Global Heart Network (GHN) works by putting experts, volunteers and patients around

Case study



HEALTHY: Julia Villarta, who had life-saving heart surgery thanks to the Global Heart Network

A mother's story: Dann Ria Villarta, from the Philippines, tells how she found out her daughter, Julia, four, had a life-threatening heart defect and of her search to find someone who could help.

September 12, 2011. I can never forget this date. The day when I was broken into pieces. This was the day when I knew my daughter has a heart defect.

I can still fully remember when her doctor showed me the echo video and explained her heart condition.

Julia was sitting on my lap, my hubby was on the other side of the table and I was just holding my tears, listening to the doctor's explanations. The doctor told me that she has a heart defect known as Atrial Septal Defect.

It was my first time to know about this defect and even as

the doctor was explaining about how it goes, my mind was flying and I was very scared to lose my daughter – my life.

The doctor gave me two options: to let Julia undergo an open-heart surgery or just to wait for her to expire.

It was blunt but very real. I couldn't believe my daughter, whom I love so much, will just live in this world shortly. Tears kept falling from my eyes and my entire body was shaking uncontrollably. I was asking God "Why this short? I still want to spend a lifetime with my princess."

I asked the doctor how much is needed for the surgery and he told me an amount that I don't think I and my husband could find even if we work for five years. He said that we must decide while Julia is still in the golden time, meaning *while there are still no complications*.

Upon going home, Julia asked me: "Mama, are you crying? Is everything okay with me? Am I gonna be dead?"

I just hugged her tight and whispered to her: "Don't worry baby; mama will find a way... you'll be fine."

That night I was just watching Julia and her Dad sleeping. I was on bended knee, seeking God's help, desperately begging to give my daughter a chance to live and die old. Right after my prayer, it came to my mind to check the internet. I made a short letter and I sent it to foundations in different parts of the world. I just kept on sending and sending until, unknowingly, it was already 5am and I have to work and be in school at 7.30am.

I cannot just watch my child expire without me doing something. And even in the following days I was just doing the same routines, asking

anyone for connections and waiting and hoping for a reply from any of them, desperately.

This is a letter Annabel received from Dann Ria after Julia had surgery in the US, thanks to the Global Heart Network.

Dear Ma'am Annabel, Thank you so much for all your prayers. Julia has now a healthy heart! The worst is over. I have never been happy like this. Finally my child can live a normal life and can reach her dreams. She has been longing to jump more, run more and do things like other kids, and now she is.

It has been a great journey. I feel blessed. I appreciate you so much, Ma'am Annabel. I may not have seen you in person but I know you are an angel and I will keep you in my heart and prayers. Thank you so much.



SAVING LIVES: Clockwise from far left, Annabel with Mohammed, another of the African children treated in Paris for heart conditions; Annabel and her children, Lucy, Nelly and Elise; Annabel's mentor, Professor Afksendiyos Kalangos, head of cardiovascular surgery at University Hospital Geneva and chair of the Global Heart Network; Annabel's daughter, Elise, who had heart surgery as a baby, with Cheikhou; Cheikhou and Annabel

Photos: CONTRIBUTED



the world in touch, to try to improve access to care for the world's poorest.

Annabel says there are already examples of the difference the network has made.

After months of negotiations she has recently managed to get a visa for a two-year-old Kenyan girl and her mother to travel to Switzerland this month for treatment.

"The young girl's aunt discovered the network on the internet and contacted us for help. We have been working on this case for months and have just arranged for the little girl to get a visa to go to Geneva for vital surgery."

It is hoped the network will in time be able to save the lives of thousands of children throughout the developing world who are

suffering from potentially-fatal heart defects and other cardiovascular diseases.

Professor Kalangos, who is known as the "heart missionary" for the life-saving operations he has performed on more than 12,000 children, says the need is clear.

"Hundreds and thousands of children are dying every year for no reason at all. Many of them need to be treated and operated on before they are two years old but, because they can't get access to surgery in their own countries, they are dying for nothing."

It is estimated that approximately eight million children in the world suffer from heart defects and that one million die in their first year of life. The two main killers are congenital

heart disease and strep throat, a bacterial throat infection that can lead to rheumatic heart disease.

Professor Kalangos says many lives could be saved if there were better co-ordination between voluntary organisations working on the ground in emerging countries, local healthcare services, and heart specialists in the West.

He adds: "The operation which children suffering from congenital heart defects need to save their lives is inexpensive – only a thousand dollars for the operating materials. However, we can only do this if we get to them quickly, before they are too old. Speed is essential and what is so revolutionary about this new platform is that we should now be able to

connect everybody together quickly to make surgery possible."

The network will initially concentrate on African countries where Annabel has been working with voluntary organisations for several years, helping them bring young patients to the West for treatment.

Annabel hopes the Global Heart Network will have at least 2,000 members within five years, including voluntary organisations, hospitals, patients, family members and donors. "Our aim is for at least 25% of voluntary organisations in the field to sign up with the GHN," she says. "That could make a real difference."

For more information visit www.globalheartnetwork.net