The title of this book, *Children First*, is the idea that drove Jim Grant during his years at Unicef. It not only drove him. It consumed him. And it shone from him wherever he went.

Many years ago, I went on my first field trip with Jim. This was soon after he became Unicef’s Executive Director and soon after the beginning of the main story in this book. I was new to Unicef too, and proud to be its first woman Goodwill Ambassador.

I could not believe Jim’s energy. We flew and we talked and he was never tired. We would run between villages in Africa and Asia because he had much to see. Time for Jim was always limited because the days had only 24 hours.

Upon reaching each new village or community or hut, he would stop and ask questions and see what was going on and explain his own point of view. Then off we went to new destinations. I was much younger than Jim, but still I was the one to be tired. He would turn around to me and wave ‘come on!’ There was no rest.

His purpose was always to make the world a better place for children. With him, it was always ‘children first’. There was another way he used to put it: ‘first call for children’. I shall always connect that idea with Jim. I remember his joy the day in September 1990 when he gathered 71 leaders from countries all around the world for the World Summit for Children in New York. What was it for? ‘Children first.’ I remember his determination that all the nations in the world, especially the US, should ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. That, too, was all about ‘children first’.
This book is not strictly about Jim, although Jim is hidden somewhere in most of its pages. This book is about what Unicef did over 50 years, especially in the past 15, to make the idea of 'children first' real for millions of people. Jim wouldn't have liked a book that made it sound as though everything Unicef did during his time was because of him. That kind of self-importance was not his style.

But those of us who knew Jim, who saw him at work, coming up with his ideas, coming out with his roar of approval, coming on at a pace we could barely keep up with—we know that an incredible number of things Unicef did could be traced straight to Jim. Not just things done by Unicef, either, but by many other important people and organizations too—all sorts of things in which Unicef took a back seat because, he said, getting others to join in was what counted. So he always gave them the credit. Jim was an almost supernatural force who made impossible hopes and dreams come true.

When I was a child, one of my favourite stories was about a little boy who, by magic, became full of power. He spent his life flying on the back of a wild goose all over the world. In the wonderment of the boy's eyes, the whole world became clear to him. He did not always know if the goose would fly with him high or low, or where they were going. But he always knew there was a purpose—to learn and to do.

And he listened to the dreams of the old people and the young people. The more he knew, the more he did, so that he could make hopes and dreams become reality. The longer he flew, more and more birds with passengers flew with him to help make the world a better place. When I think of Jim, I remember that story.

When Jim listened to a mother in a village in Africa or Asia and looked at her sick baby, and when he stood in front of a President, he used to put his hand in his pocket. And you always knew what he was about to do. He would pull out a packet of those oral rehydration salts (ORS). He would show the mother or the President how you mix the salts with water, and how you save the life of a child with diarrhoea. And then they would become new messengers for his way of solving the sad fact that so many children die quietly each day from preventable diseases.

And on those travels, when night came, he would still want to have new meetings—with health workers, teachers, officials, whomever. And again, from his pocket, he would take out his packet of ORS. And sometimes, I would be ashamed and think that, no, he must let these exhausted people eat their meal in peace. But each evening ended with another official, or health worker, or
Minister, or President promising to carry out his—Jim’s—programme for ‘children first’.

And then, coming back to the same country years later, I would see strangers stand like Jim and put their hands in their pockets, and take out the packet of ORS. And I would hear them talk with his enthusiasm of the lives they had saved.

Jim’s work was a revolution for boys’ and girls’ survival and the dignity of life. This revolution saved more than 25 million children’s lives in the years I knew him. And his revolution saved even greater numbers of children from growing up handicapped from diseases such as polio and from vitamin A deficiency.

Jim would go anywhere to promote his revolution. And he had great courage. Near the beginning of the war in the now former Yugoslavia, the fighting soldiers and their generals promised a week of no shooting. They made this promise in the name of ‘children first’. Jim phoned me and asked if I would come with him on a peace march and drive through the most dangerous passage of all—Snipers’ Alley—to show that peace and talk were possible. ‘But,’ I protested, ‘what if the cease-fire is broken?’ ‘Well,’ said Jim, ‘we’ll be there and find out.’

It was Jim’s idea that this book should be written. And it was Jim who asked Maggie Black to write it. She wrote a book for Unicef’s 40th anniversary in 1986, The Children and the Nations. Jim liked that book very much. He was always telling people to read it. I’m sure he would do the same with this one. And like the little boy in the fairy tale, he would still be flying high, hoping that those who read it will feel the power of his message and help to make ‘children first’ a reality for millions more.

Liv Ullmann
Goodwill Ambassador for Unicef