

Brave New Girl

From outbreak-gripped Liberia to earthquake-torn Nepal, Kelly Suter goes where no one else wants to.

Kelly Suter is terrified of spiders. She also cannot stand dirty laundry. Yet this tenacious nurse from Michigan has spent the past five years at the epicenter of every major natural disaster and epidemic in the developing world. Only 30 years old, she is a prized asset of the International Medical Corps, one of the largest first-responder organizations on the planet—think the Red Cross with a Navy SEAL approach to emergency aid. Among the IMC's ranks of 7,800, plus a deployment roster of thousands of medical workers, Suter is the most fervent, the one willing to helicopter in while mountains still crumble and calmly strategize next steps.

Suter recently returned from assignment in Nepal, where the 7.8-magnitude Gorkha earthquake killed 8,800 and injured some 22,000. Overseeing the heavily hit region of

compassion was put to use during her one-month assignment in war-torn South Sudan, where she ran a primary-health clinic serving 20,000 internally displaced people.

Just as Ebola began ripping through West Africa, Suter flew to Liberia. Along with treating the sick, she was one of the lead clinical trainers for teams as diverse as the German army and the United States Public Health Service. "You never get used to seeing patients die," she says, recalling the day she entered a contamination unit to find an improving patient suddenly coughing blood. "She looked up at me," says Suter, "and, without warning, fell backward onto her bed—never taking another breath."

Suter went home for her quarantine; weeks later she took her North Face go-bag—filled with medical essentials and clothing, plus peanut butter, laundry detergent, and a



READY, WILLING, LABELED
FROM LEFT: KELLY SUTER HELPS AN INJURED EARTHQUAKE SURVIVOR DISEMBARK FROM AN IMC HELICOPTER IN KATHMANDU; A COLLEAGUE WRITES SUTER'S NAME ON HER FOREHEAD TO HELP PATIENTS RECOGNIZE HER IN THE EBOLA WARD.

Dhading, Suter would board a helicopter and head into a remote mountain village with a small team to set up her tent and a mobile medical clinic in whatever safe structure remained. She'd sometimes see about 200 patients in two days, then board another chopper, restock with whatever limited supplies were available at base camp, and head back out to a different village. The aftershocks were relentless. "All of the aid workers had a packed bag, carried their passport with them at all times, and slept in something they could run through the streets in," she recalls.

And that was a "comparatively fun" assignment, she says. (In her spare time, she hiked to Everest base camp.) Suter's first deployment with the IMC came after she received her nursing degree in 2008. A few weeks after the earthquake hit Haiti in January 2010, Suter was on a plane bound for Port-au-Prince. She witnessed unimaginable suffering—one night she spent two hours rocking an abandoned preterm newborn until the baby girl gently passed away. "I learned quite a bit in Haiti, including that sometimes having empathy is more important than administering medical care," she says. That

clothesline—and headed to Nepal. "Everyone has something that helps keep them sane, and mine is clean clothes," she says.

Suter no longer has to live out of her duffel. This summer, IMC created a full-time job specifically tailored to her skills, as the senior adviser for medical planning and preparedness. "It's my first big-girl job," she jokes. Suter now helps the massive organization pre-stage the best possible response for wherever the next war or disease or earthquake should hit. She can finally go for her beloved evening runs—"hard to do in a country that has just experienced a disaster"—and she and her sister, who plans to move in with her, hope to start taking hip-hop dance classes together. She may be sitting at a desk in Washington, D.C., but she has her eyes on the field. "I told them I'd only sign the contract provided it wouldn't prevent me from being deployed," says Suter. She's hoping to go to Yemen, a failing state where bombs rain down daily. "Don't tell my mom," she pleads.—HEIDI MITCHELL