Dr. Ebby Elahi, a New York-based oculofacial surgeon, was used to seeing pain and disfigurement. As the director of global health of the nonprofit Virtue Foundation, he has traveled the globe as a volunteer, repairing harrowing injuries. But one tiny girl particularly touched his heart.

Her name is Sophie, and at one month old she was horribly burned in an acid attack that took place while her mother, Chan, breastfed her in their rural village in Cambodia. The attack, by a woman who claimed to be the mistress of Chan's husband, left the baby blind in one eye, with grotesque burns covering a large portion of her face; Chan had suffered extensive damage to her right ear, face, body and arms. Sophie was so badly injured that a relative suggested that Chan "throw her out and make another."

"This baby was hard to bear. It was difficult for me," Ebby said after he'd encountered Sophie and Chan in a burn ward in Phnom Penh, "because she is living in an environment where you need all your faculties to survive."

But the tragedy in Cambodia would take a surprising, heartening turn. Not only would Sophie and Chan have a good measure of health restored, including Sophie's sight, but countless other lives would be changed: that of Ebby, Kim Azzarelli, co-founder of Fast Forward, dozens of strangers in New York and, eventually, victims of injustice around the world. And it was all because so many of those involved found in Sophie and Chan's story a new sense of purpose.
WE LIVE WITH BLINDERS ON (AND HOW TO TAKE THEM OFF)

At that time, Kim was working at Avon, where she recently had been promoted to vice president and associate general counsel. Soon after Ebby's return to New York, the two friends were catching up at his office, where Kim told Ebby about the burden of her demanding workload. He suggested that she consider something that might change her perspective, perhaps travel to another part of the world where she could experience how others live. Kim smiled politely, wondering how that would help with her already overbooked schedule.

Soon after, Ebby invited Kim to a conference that he'd helped organize at Rockefeller University. Kim walked into the auditorium expecting an engaging event, but what she saw changed everything. Confronted with the photos of little Sophie, her left eye seared shut, her face and scalp covered in braids of scar tissue, she was appalled by the injustice. As a lawyer, Kim was angered by the attacker's apparent impunity. Despite the prevalence of acid violence in Cambodia, there seemed to be little legal recourse for what had happened to Chan and Sophie and so many others.

Suddenly, Ebby's suggestion began to make sense. Kim realized how fortunate she was in her life, but now she realized that she was in a position to make a real difference: All the skills and power she had worked for could be used for a positive purpose. Shortly after the event she called Ebby to ask how to get involved. Their next conversation accelerated a change in how she viewed her job and her life.

Ebby told Kim how his own perspective had shifted as a result of his work overseas. He recalled that one day shortly after his return to New York, a piercing winter wind struck his face as he left for work. That stinging sensation, which ordinarily would have caused him to wince in discomfort, instead prompted him to think of Chan, Sophie, and all the other acid-attack victims whose burns had resulted in significant loss of sensation.

In that moment, Ebby felt almost grateful for the pain; it was a reminder of the fact that he could actually feel his face. Reframing one's perspective through the lens of gratitude, he says, can have a profound impact on the way we experience and perceive the events in our lives.
"We live with blinders on," Ebby explains. "When I came back from working with the acid burn victims in Cambodia, I started to focus on the things I took for granted. When was the last time I thought about the fact that my limbs can move, that I can open my eyes and see? There are 285 million people around the world who are visually impaired, of whom nearly 40 million are completely blind."

"It's a shift in perspective," Ebby says, "meaning that your sense of life satisfaction ultimately depends on your personal, chosen frame of reference."

One of the most effective ways to reframe one's perspective is through volunteerism and service. "To paraphrase my grandfather Ostad Elahi, we should be grateful for the opportunity to do good, in part because we ourselves have the most to gain by doing so," he said. "When you view your life through the lens of a larger purpose, you create a larger arc for your life, where day-to-day events become subservient to your greater goal. The momentary ups and downs become dusty winds on the road of your larger journey."

When Kim learned about Sophie, she gained a new perspective. Seeing that innocent baby and knowing she had suffered for days without medical attention inspired Kim to want to do more. She knew she could put her resources to work.

Kim was at the right company. Avon had a long history of empowering women — indeed, it was in the business of empowering women entrepreneurs through its direct-selling model. Now she began to think about how her work there could help advance women and girls around the world.

She quickly became "addicted to purpose." She found herself energized and excited about her job, since it gave her the chance to give back. And she kept looking for new opportunities to do so.

One arose in 2008, when she was asked to speak at a State Department gathering about how to combat violence against women using judicial and legal tools. Participants included Condoleezza Rice and Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, as well as judges and legal professionals from 75 countries. As Kim gave the closing remarks, she felt she could not let this day end without establishing some way to continue the dialogue. Smiling from the podium, she made a silent promise to the little Cambodian girl and other acid-violence victims — and then announced the creation of a center for women and justice. Stepping back from the podium, Kim maintained her smile but hoped that she could deliver on this promise.

Her faith was soon borne out. A few days later, Kim took a chance and put in a call to Justice O'Connor's office, only half-expecting a response. Soon Kim's office phone rang. A voice said, "Is this Kim Azzarelli? This is Justice Sandra Day O'Connor." Kim described her vision for an institution that would help women judges around the world in combating violence against women. "I would be happy to support your proposed center for women judges," Justice O'Connor replied. When she heard those words, Kim knew her vision would become a reality.

Her next stop was the Virtue Foundation. With the support of Ebby and his colleagues, as well as the Avon Foundation, the center was becoming a
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realistic. Then there was the question of where to house the center. Kim approached her alma mater, Cornell Law School, and its dean, Stewart Schwab. Until that day Kim had had little contact with him, and as she walked into his office, she prepared herself for what she expected to be a difficult pitch. But the conversation went surprisingly well; she wondered why until her eyes landed on a photograph on the dean's desk. In it, a much younger Stewart Schwab stood, smiling, with Justice O'Connor. Seeing Kim's face, Dean Schwab turned to look at the photo. "Oh, yes," he said. "I was one of her first law clerks."

Now six years old, Cornell Law School's Avon Global Center for Women and Justice has provided pro bono assistance and training to judges around the world on issues ranging from child marriage to human trafficking to peace building and domestic violence. One of its first reports, a three-country study of acid violence, resulted in a model legal code that would hold perpetrators of acid violence accountable — ultimately influencing changes in Cambodian law. And with the help of Justice O'Connor, the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University, in collaboration with the O'Connor House, expanded its advocacy against domestic violence, creating the Diane Halle Center for Family Justice.

Years later, the justice was walking with Kim in New York. She stopped, turned to Kim, placed both hands on her shoulders, and said, "Do you know how many women are not being beaten right now because of these efforts? I hope you realize this."

The plight of little Sophie—who today has much of her sight restored, and, along with her mother, many of her injuries repaired—had truly unleashed a range of far-reaching purpose-driven works.

Excerpted from Fast Forward: How Women Can Achieve Power and Purpose, by co-authors Melanne Verveer and Kim Azzarelli, co-founders Seneca Women.