

EVEN AT 5FT 4IN MIA FARROW IS SOMEHOW TALLER than one expects, as she greets you at her sprawling 200-year-old farmhouse, overlooking its own lake, and set in 60 acres of glorious Connecticut countryside. The low-beamed ceilings, the book-lined walls, the patina of old wood, the English country garden that she and her children planted themselves, all point to someone for whom family and roots are central to who she is. The refectory table in the dining room is long enough to seat her large family, both the children she adopted and her own four offspring.

But Mia, in jeans and a pink sweater, with her blonde, wavy hair tumbling around her delicate face, is even more ethereal-looking in person than she is in her films. Her fragile frame dates from her bout with polio at age nine, one year before the first vaccine against the disease was developed in 1955, although polio was still infecting people in the West until 1979.

"I was so underweight, the family dubbed me 'mouse,'" she says. "After polio, I was forever being measured to make sure I was growing properly, which if you compare me with my siblings and parents, I wasn't. I'm much smaller than any of them."

Now, like many polio survivors, Mia, 60 this year, lives with the spectre that post-polio syndrome, or PPS, could rob her of the good health she's enjoyed since her childhood recovery. "Post-polio is a threat to so many people, yet many doctors don't know that people can be revisited by polio when they reach middle age, or any time after," says Mia. "Many of the same symptoms you had initially can return. People who are walking can end up

back in braces, people in braces can end up back in a wheelchair, those who are going to work may not be able to do so anymore because of fatigue and weakness."

PPS is triggered by decades of what is known as "overuse abuse". Virtually every muscle in the body is affected by polio, as are neurons that keep the brain awake and focus attention. The polio virus damages 95% of brain stem and spinal cord motor neurons, killing on average at least half of them. The surviving neurons are now failing and dying from overuse, triggering post-polio syndrome symptoms.

There are an estimated 350,000 polio survivors in Britain and nearly three million Europeans; about 70% of those who experienced paralytic polio and 40% who had non-paralytic polio, as did Mia, are experiencing PPS, according to Richard Bruno, PhD, who chairs the International Post-Polio Task Force.

"It's why I don't exercise," says Mia. "And it's why I tell my son, Thaddeus, not to. I know I could develop post-polio syndrome. I try not to dwell on it." Thaddeus is her adopted son from India and, like Mia, a polio survivor, but unlike her, he is paralysed in both legs.

"People who've had polio are supposed to take special care of themselves," says Mia. "And this I do. I've told Thaddeus also, but he's too young, at 15, to really appreciate what that means. He thinks because his upper body is very strong from using his canes and the chair, that he's fine. But he needs to know not to overdo it."

"The main thing we polio survivors have to remember is to ward off exhaustion, conserve energy, get the rest we need. Not to exercise, or over-exert. We can't try to ►

# Mama Mia

Motherhood is a way of life for the actress Mia Farrow, who adopted 10 children as well as giving birth to four of her own.

But as she explains to **Jan Goodwin**, her childhood was blighted by polio – an experience that filled her with fighting spirit



◀ develop body strength. For people who've had polio, the more you do, the quicker you'll have problems."

It was at her ninth birthday party, in February 1954, that Mia first showed symptoms of the disease. Her legs buckled under her when a playmate kicked a ball her way. The next morning, she couldn't stand. The family pediatrician paid a house call to give her a spinal tap.

"I could hear my family praying. I knew it was for me," recalls Mia. "It was a time of polio epidemics in America. People didn't go to public pools because of it. When I couldn't get up, polio was the first thing on everyone's mind. I understood that very well. I was sure I was going to die." When she was told she was being taken to the hospital, she instructed that her childhood treasures be divided so that every member of the family could have something. "As I was being carried out of the room, I heard the doctor say to my mother, 'You'd better burn all that'."

When Mia did eventually return home weeks later, her petrified parents – the writer and director John Farrow and actress Maureen O'Sullivan – had emptied their Beverly Hills house. "Because no-one was sure how polio was spread, everything was burned," says Mia. "The house had been emptied of furniture, the carpets removed, the lawn torn up, the swimming pool drained. My six siblings had been sent away to be safe, and the dog was gotten rid of."

At the hospital, Mia had been placed in an iron lung. "It was terrifying," she says. "You were completely confined. You couldn't even scratch your nose. My parents weren't allowed to visit. They could only look at me through a glass window at the end of the ward days later. There were so many of us, even the halls of the hospital were lined with adults and children in iron lungs. It was pandemonium, people wailing and screaming. The deaths! But what I remember most is that the adults, the medical staff, were afraid of their patients. They didn't want to touch us. It was very traumatic, more so than the disease."

Polio was particularly fearsome, says Mia, because it wasn't clear how it was contracted. "No-one knows how I got it," she says. "Other parents didn't want to have their children near me. When I went back to school for half days eight months later, no-one would play with me."

Mia says that it was because of this experience that she became involved with special-needs children. "Susan Sontag [the author] said we all carry two passports – the land of the well, and the land of the ill," she says. "Any minute the passport for the land of the well can be revoked and you're in another land entirely. I know that other land – the uncertainty, and fear and pain and death. I know many others are in that world right now. How, in a minute, anyone of us can be flipped in. You get your X-ray or blood analysis results back, and in a second, you travel to another world – the world of doctors, hospitals, treatments."

Her experiences gave her a sense of empathy and responsibility, she says. It's also why she became a goodwill ambassador for UNICEF. "There's emotional trauma in having had polio. You can't put trauma in a drawer. You carry it with you. It becomes part of the fabric of your life."

Mia first began adopting needy children when she was married to Andre Previn, the conductor, composer and pianist, with whom she also had three children. Eventually, she went on to adopt 10 children from around the world, and have a fourth child with Woody Allen. Currently, seven children, including a grandson by marriage, are at home.

Visiting her at her sprawling house she introduces me to the four who were at home. She manages with a part-time housekeeper, Helen, who moves in full time if she is ▶

## Mia's brood

The first to arrive were twins, **Matthew**, a lawyer, and **Sascha**, an accountant, now 34. Their father was Andre Previn, whose eight-year marriage to Mia ended in 1979.

**Lark Song Previn**, age 31, an orphan from Vietnam, was the first child Mia adopted. "The senselessness of Andre and I having another baby when already there were so many children in the world needing homes was dramatically underlined by the war in Vietnam," Mia said then. Lark survived two bouts of pneumonia before she was three months old and she was hospitalised again with pneumonia in 1998. She has two young daughters.

**Fletcher Previn**, 30, Andre's son. Read government at Connecticut College. Hopes to "go into movies and make great films".

**Summer Song (Daisy) Previn**. Survived the "orphan airlift" – the plane that crashed while taking orphans out of Vietnam. She weighed just six pounds when she arrived in America aged seven months. Now 30, she married the brother of Lark's husband.

**Soon-Yi Previn**, 34. Adopted in 1977. Abandoned on the streets of Seoul at the age of five. Mia ran up against a US law that allowed families only two adoption visas – so she got the law changed. Soon-Yi had an affair with Woody Allen, once Mia's long-term partner, when she was 17, and is now married to him.

**Moses Amadeus Farrow**, (his birthday is the same day as Mozart's) now 26. Arrived in 1980 after Mia's divorce. He had been left on a street in Korea when he was two suffering from cerebral palsy – Mia had particularly asked an adoption agency for a child with special needs. He had two operations on a leg followed by six years of physical therapy and speech therapy. He now has a master's degree in marriage and family therapy.

**Malone**, 19, first called Dylan after Dylan Thomas and then Eliza. Adopted in 1985 as a newborn baby after Mia and Woody Allen had tried for two years to have a baby.

**Seamus**, 17, Woody's son with Mia, originally called Satchel until he was teased at school. Mia became pregnant at the time they were discussing adopting another baby. Entered Bard College at 11 and went on to law school.

**Isaiah**, 12 (named after Isaiah Berlin). In February 1992 Mia, having just learnt of Woody Allen's affair with her daughter Soon-Yi, was called by an adoption agency and asked if she would take an African American baby who was addicted to crack cocaine. He would otherwise have had to be put in permanent foster care, so she agreed to take him.

**Tam** arrived at almost the same time as Isaiah after a long adoption process. She was a blind Vietnamese orphan aged 10 or 11 and had never been to school. She died of a heart condition in 2000, aged 19.

**Quincy**, 10, or Kaeli-Shea as she was known originally. Adopted after an adoption agency rang Mia and asked if she would take her. She appeared to be a healthy African American baby but she could not move her arms.

**Thaddeus**, 15, Mia was called by another adoption agency at much the same time as she adopted Kaeli-Shea and asked if she would take him. He had polio and had been abandoned at a Calcutta railway station then brought up in an orphanage. He was originally named Gabriel Wilk after the judge who ruled in Mia's favour in her custody battle against Woody Allen.

**Minh**, 14, now called Frankie-Minh after Frank Sinatra. The Farrow family was waiting for Thaddeus to arrive when they were called about Minh, a three-year-old blind Vietnamese orphan. They said no – but a year later Minh was still unadopted and Mia and her children agreed to take her.

Research by Gloria Fletcher







◀ away. Despite the various turmoils the household has been through, what strikes me most is how calm everyone is. Farrow seems amazingly relaxed with all her children.

She says that the most severely disabled are Thaddeus, and her adopted daughter, Frankie, 14, who is blind. Frankie is named after Mia's first husband, Frank Sinatra, whom she married when she was 21, and with whom, despite what the tabloids said at the time of their divorce, she remained good friends.

She found Thaddeus at an orphanage near Calcutta. "Thaddeus is special in a very, very wonderful way," she says with a smile. When Mia first saw him, he was so malnourished and weak he was being tormented and beaten by the other children, and wasn't expected to live long. "He was six or nine, no-one knew. He could barely speak because hardly anyone had ever spoken to him.

"And because he dragged himself along on all fours, his knees and the tops of his feet were open sores. He was so weak, he couldn't hold his head up."

Looking at Thaddeus, a good-looking, charming young man, it's hard to reconcile that earlier image with the young man we see today. He endured years of painful physical therapy after being adopted by Mia. "Sure, he was not opposed to throwing lamps at the beginning, but why not? He was going through so much," she says. "But he was soon at school, making friends and playing baseball."

Like a mother tiger with her cubs, Mia is outraged that now that Thaddeus is going into high school, the coach won't accept him on the baseball team. "They are so competitive, they don't want anyone in a wheelchair on the team. It's very hard for my son," she says – and she told the school that she thought it was shameful. "Everyone would learn so much from Thaddeus. He zooms to the ball, and catapults right out of his wheelchair to catch it. He's got a wonderfully strong throwing arm. But the school couldn't care less. The desire to win at all costs eclipsed the desire to understand and include."

It is not the first time Mia has had to do battle. "Two of my adopted children are African American, and I had to take one out of public school because of the racism here. In this lily-white town, we are the only family of colour."

Mia also sees her son Seamus, her child with Woody Allen, as special. He started college at 11, and graduated from university last year at 15. While he still doesn't have a learner's driving permit, Seamus has been accepted by Yale Law School, where he plans to study human rights law. At five, he was explaining black hole theory, and at 10, reading Camus, Kafka and Sartre – not surprising perhaps, since Mia shares Allen's razor-sharp intellect. Fortunately for both mother and child, she lacks the filmmaker's neuroses. "There were three people in our relationship," says Mia, "Woody, his shrink, and me. He couldn't make any decision in life, even the most minor, without her."

Physically, Seamus also favours Mia's side of the family. To spend two minutes with him is to realise that here is a young man who is extremely eloquent and at the same time very engaging. So while his peers are in the 10th grade, Seamus is working as the personal assistant to Richard Holbrook, former US Ambassador to the UN.

Seamus has not seen his father since a bitter court battle ended with Mia winning custody in 1992. The couple separated because Allen was having an affair with Mia's 17-year-old adopted daughter, Soon-Yi (whom he married in 1997). Mia learnt about the affair when Allen, now 71, left pornographic photographs he'd taken of the girl, described by the judge as "naive, socially inexperienced and

vulnerable", displayed on his mantelpiece on a day he knew Mia would be visiting him. "It was such a sense of betrayal with Woody," says Mia. "You are never the same. Soon-Yi was a kid when I found her living on the streets of Korea. She was seven when Woody met her. He justified what he did by saying she was not really my daughter because she was adopted. I'd raised her since she was five. He was a man out of control trying to make sense of what he did by playing by his own rules."

Seamus is startlingly clear in his attitude to his father: "I can't have a relationship with my father and be morally consistent. I live with all these adopted children; they are my family. To say Soon-Yi was not my sister is an insult to all adopted children. I harbour no anger. But I do not see him. He's my father married to my sister. That makes me his son and his brother-in-law. That is such a moral transgression."

Today, Soon-Yi is no longer considered part of Mia's family. "With her, there would have been 14 children in our family, that is until Tam [her 19-year-old daughter from Vietnam] died of a heart condition four years ago," she says.

'I haven't met anyone else. And if I did, then I'd have to worry about their food, their shirts, their work. It would really have to be somebody very special'

"Soon-Yi is now someone most of the children living at home have never met. We can't go around saying we have a missing child, it would be bewildering. We have to finally close the circle and say she is no longer part of this family."

"But life is good," she says, "and the kids are great." Mia is not involved with anyone romantically. "I haven't met someone else," she says in her lilting voice. "And if I did, then I'd have to worry about their food, their shirts, their work, I'm not sure I want to do that again. It would really have to be somebody very special."

Of all the children in her family, Seamus is the one who takes the strongest interest in her human rights campaigning. She took him to Nigeria with her when he was 10, when she made her first UNICEF trip, and he also accompanied her two years ago when she travelled to Angola. "I wanted him to have a conscience, and a consciousness about the world around him," says Mia.

Certainly Mia wears her conscience loud and clear. During the Clinton years, she contacted the President demanding to know why the USA hadn't signed the international land mine treaty and she telephoned the head of the World Bank to ask why billions of dollars of US oil money goes to a few wealthy families in Africa. Even her car is a political statement – a 1993 Volvo rather than a gas-guzzling vehicle. "We all have a hand in what is happening, we shouldn't be so reliant on foreign oil," she says.

She is outraged that Islamic mullahs in northern Nigeria halted the immunisation programme there by claiming it was a plot by the West to sterilise African girls. Although the ban now appears to have been lifted, this has meant that polio has made a comeback in 10 African countries.

"They are playing politics with children's health," she says. "The tragedy is that without what has been happening in Nigeria, polio would have been eradicated worldwide." ■

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