

Crackers and Courage

Charlotte Dolan Clarkson



“You’re OK but your feet don’t match”, my future husband jokingly said to me as he was walking me home from our first meeting. He hadn’t noticed that I was limping. Did he know that he was right on target?

I was nine when I contracted Polio. Other than a limp, I didn’t have any other symptoms (that my mother noticed) when I came home from school that September day, in 1950. That night the family doctor came and diagnosed me with Rheumatic Fever; sending me directly to bed rest. Even way back when, doctors didn’t know much about Polio. Within 2 days I had lost all control of my legs. I could not stand on or lift them. I believe my mother doubted the doctor because a couple weeks later she began to stand me up. Putting her arms under my armpits and knees in back of mine, she would walk me up and down the hallway. I began to show a little improvement. I was finally allowed to be carried downstairs to be with the rest of the family. I prayed really hard that I would walk before Christmas.

One day, my mother had to go a few blocks to the bank. I was carried down to the sofa and kept my 2 year old sister company. While she was gone, I got hungry and ask little Violet to get crackers from the kitchen. She couldn’t reach them. So back to prayer it was. “Please God, just let me get to the kitchen cabinet for crackers”. I picked myself up from the sofa and holding on to all the furniture on the way, I walked out to those crackers. That’s as far as I got. My legs folded and down I went. So back to prayer again. “Lord, please get me back to the sofa so I can eat my crackers”. It worked again. I pushed myself up to the cabinet using the kitchen chair and got back to the sofa the same way. My little sister kept laughing. That night, I surprised my mother while she was cooking dinner by walking to the table by myself. Then I surprised my father after dinner by walking back to the living room.

This improvement led my mother to contact the March of Dimes to see what my options were. They arranged for home therapy & braces and then I was transferred to Widener Memorial School for handicapped children (in Philadelphia). With the wonderful care I received at Widener, I improved so much that after four years they released me to attend regular public school. I no longer needed the crutches or brace. With the exception of a slight limp, I was walking just like every other little girl.

In high school I was having a little trouble. Mom called the March of Dimes and they arranged an appointment with an orthopedist. As a result I had three operations to correct foot problems. After missing two semesters, I returned to Kensington H.S. for the remainder of 12th grade. The school counselor sent some of us out for job interviews. I went to Ritter

Finance Co. and was not accepted because of my limp. That was a disappointment for sure, but don’t tell *us* we can’t. I aced my next job interview and worked until I retired at 72 years old.

I was 19 years old when I met my husband, Ron; the joker. We married the next year. I had the first of our five children at 21 and the youngest at 28. For the next 40 years I enjoyed doing carpentry, paneling, wallpapering, renovating my home even building a 20’ long x 6’ high cinder block wall while keeping a 9-5 job.

After volunteering at my children’s elementary school a great offer for a job came my way. That job eventually led to my final one continued ...



Charlotte and Ron

at St. Joseph's Prep High School. While working at the "Prep", my husband and I opened a Vacuum Cleaner & Sewing machine repair business, where I worked in the evenings, after my regular job. We maintained that business until his death in 2008.

Life has been busy, and I am grateful for that. As you can see, my polio experience was never a big problem until I reached 55 years old. Then I began to notice that I could not walk as far, lift as much, got tired more easily and started to experience some pain in affected areas. I didn't know what was happening. I searched for answers with different doctors but got all different kinds of responses.

Finally I joined this Delaware Valley Post-Polio Group and was able to learn about places to go and things to do to help myself.

Yes, I have slowed down, but I am grateful that I am able to take care of my symptoms and enjoy my 10 grandchildren, 2 great grandchildren and the many new friends I have met at the Post-Polio meetings.

