

We Never Walk Alone

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Carpenter Street, Philadelphia, PA

Until I was eight years old my development was probably quite normal. One morning, shortly before my ninth birthday, I had trouble getting my shoes on, but eventually I did and went off to school with this thought from my mother - "If you have any trouble during school, go to the office".

I was in 3A, Miss Bull was my teacher and she was about to give us a math test, when I thought, "aha - pain". I can remember sitting on the long, cold, marble bench in the hall outside the principal's office and being in a state of fright, knowing full well I was in over my head. The only thing to support my doubts was my mother's "If".

I remember being taken to our family doctor, who said something to the effect that I was seeking attention. That night, the pain engulfed my whole body and my mother was in a state of panic. By morning I had fallen asleep wrapped around a chair, with my head on the window ledge. It was World War II. My father was gone and my mother was alone with four children.

That same day, my Grandfather came to drive me to the Naval Hospital. This was during the war and because my father was a sailor, I was entitled to use this service. I'll never forget seeing those beautiful buildings on the grounds of the Naval Hospital of Philadelphia. All around us were Navy Waves (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) and sailors marching.

Talk about pain, I remember being given a spinal tap and my mother becoming faint. The doctor told her to "put your head down between your legs". One word from that day is very clear. POLIO. Polio was the one word that sent fear into every mother's heart. I was one of thousands of children that contracted polio

in 1944. The lives of my brothers and sister, my parents and myself were forever changed with that one word. Immediately, the neighbors withdrew because of "fear". My father was restricted to his base because of "fear". It was a fear that my entire family carried the disease.

I was taken by ambulance, far from my home, to a hospital for crippled children and placed in an isolation ward. THAT was where I discovered that the *pit of fear* has no bottom. I was never so alone in my life. I wanted desperately to be hugged, but the nurses seemed afraid to touch us. They did only what was necessary. As a result, for *way* too long, I lived out of touch with the rest of the world. My only steady companion was the swishing sound of a nearby respirator. When I finally *did* get to see my mother, she was dressed like a mummy . . . certainly *not* like a Mom. She was not allowed to cross a certain mark on the floor. She could not touch me and I could not hold on to her. To this day, I can still remember being treated with "hot packs" from my neck to my toes, with what was then seen as an accepted form of torturous medical care.

One day, when I was determined to be no longer contagious, I was taken to another ward, filled with children and teens. I felt like I was alive again! The teenagers would laugh and sing all the time, my mother could visit more often and she could even sit on my bed! Then, one day I was allowed to stand.

The day my mother came to take me from the hospital, I thought I was going home. But, in



Main Hospital Building, Naval Hospital Philadelphia. Library of Congress photo

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fact I was on my way to the Home of the Merciful Saviour, an institution for crippled children in Philadelphia. I lived there for many months.

It may be difficult for some people to understand how an institution could offer love and security, but I can honestly say that it was a stable time of my life. It also opened my eyes to the image of the person behind a deformed, crippled human body. By the time I turned nine, I was an adult. I was forced to learn and accept the fact that parents can give away their children and somehow justify it in their own minds. Sadly, I saw it happen to the children around me. Through those months of recovery, I always felt comfortable in the hospital chapel.

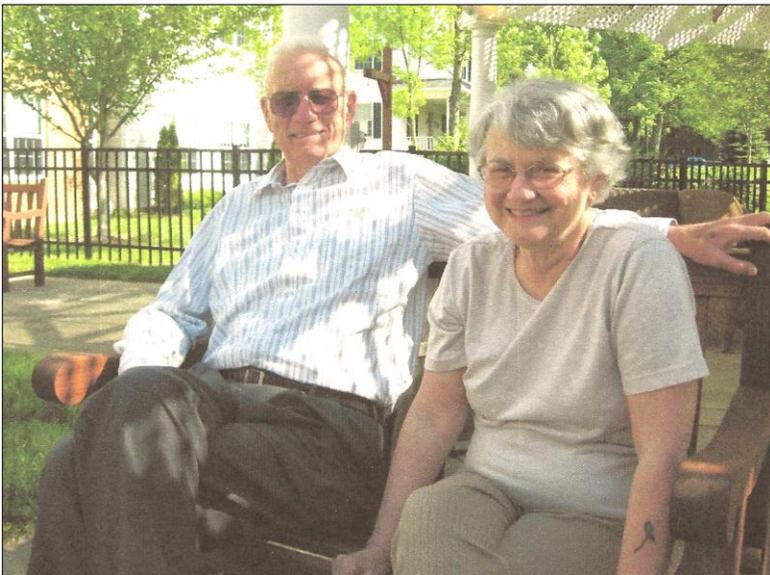


Photo credit: hmsschool.org

The one thing that the institution did *not* prepare me for was how the “outside” world would accept me. My disabled body was always in full view. I have questioned God a lot throughout my life. Looking back, I see that somehow I became aware that He was with me the entire time of my recovery. The other children were comfortable with me and I was able to give care to those in pain. Little did I know that this gift from that experience would become a way of life.

After more than 5 months of being hospitalized, I was finally able to go home. My father, now stationed in the South Pacific, would not be home until the following year. It was time for me to go back to school but I was unable to walk that far. I remember my mother putting me in a stroller and wheeling me the few blocks to our neighborhood school. She always got me there early, before the other children arrived. When I look back, I realize just how strong my mother truly was. Her oldest child was hospitalized far from home and would be permanently disabled from polio. All the while, she cared for me, my three younger siblings and other children with disabilities, with a love and devotion that would continue well after my father returned home.

One day, my mother received a message. “The war is over. Tell the kids I’m coming home.” Although it took a long time for it to actually happen, I’ll never forget the night my father returned home. While the other kids ran down the stairs to greet him, I wasn’t far behind.



I married John in 1956 and was blessed with four wonderful children of my own.

I will always be handicapped. I will always be a survivor of polio. I will always have two legs that do not match. Now, I am dealing with Post-Polio Syndrome.

My weak leg is weaker and the prognosis is not good.

But that being said, I am not alone.

I am not defined by this horrific disease that people all over the world have feared for centuries.

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Polio is not gone, it is still active in third world countries. Although there has not been a reported case in the US since 1979, my *real* fear is how easily that could change with the unsubstantiated 'fears' of vaccinations that has emerged here in the US and abroad.

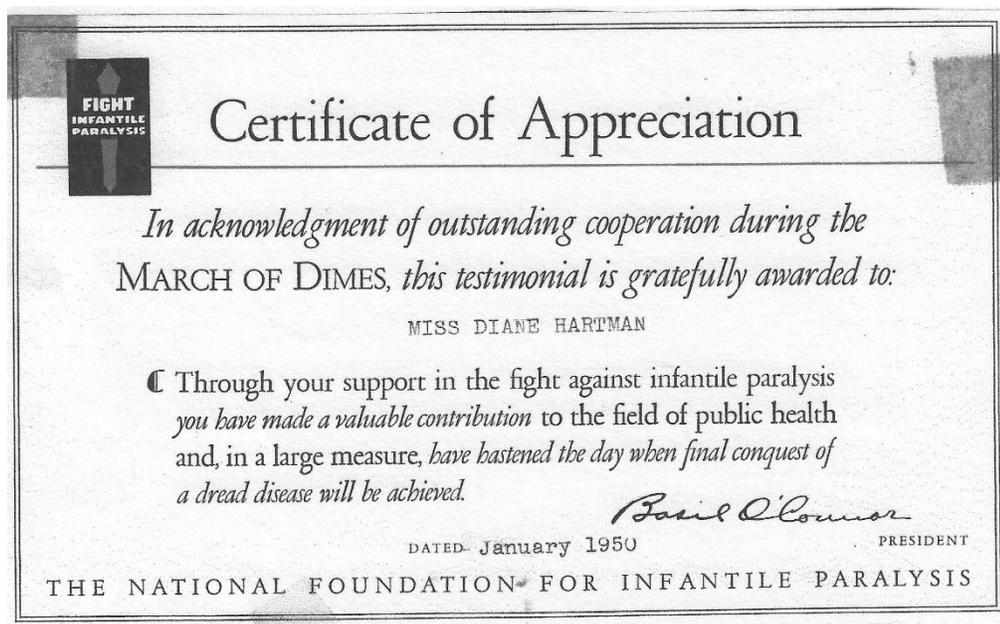
Diane Hartman Huff
May, 2020



Achieving one of her bucket list items, Diane flew a helicopter on her 80th Birthday.



Diane as "Popcorn" the clown. Bringing joy to children disabled by Muscular Dystrophy.



Certificate of Appreciation from the March of Dimes. January, 1950