

Gladys Nickleby Nelson
An Unsung Hero of Polio Eradication
Having Opened the First Polio Immunization Clinic in the United States

By Pamela Sergey with Nancy Nelson

COVID-19 is not the first health crisis the United States has faced where experts say a vaccine is needed to stop the spread. During the 1950s, people lived in fear their children might contract infantile paralysis, better known as polio. In 1952 alone there were nearly 58,000 cases reported in the U.S. that left over 3,000 dead and more than 21,000 with some form of paralysis – parents were eager for scientists to find a solution.

On February 23, 1954, one hundred and thirty-seven children from Arsenal Elementary School in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, received the first field trial injections of the new “killed virus” polio vaccine developed by Jonas Salk. Dr. Salk and his team administered the shots in the Arsenal school gym. In all, over 1.8 million first thru third graders, known as “Polio Pioneers”, participated in national randomized, double-test field trials. The trials lasted one year. The data was collected, entered on IBM punch cards, and analyzed. In April 1955, when Salk’s series of three shots was announced “safe”, mass immunization campaigns were launched. 220,000 volunteers, 20,000 doctors, 64,000 school personnel, and countless private citizens were mobilized, and by August 1955, 4 million shots had been given to U.S. school children.



Dr. Jonas Salk administering a trial polio vaccine Pittsburgh 1954
Source: Pittsburgh Post Gazette

One of the 64,000 educators mobilized in 1955 was Gladys Nickleby Nelson, a registered nurse with the Central Bucks School District, in Doylestown, PA. Gladys opened the first polio immunization clinic in the United States. Her daughter, Nancy, explains how the first clinic came about: “The Polio Clinic was the idea of Dr. Salk who was a friend of Dr. James Work the President of The Farm School (now known as Delaware Valley University). Dr. Work then contacted the [Central Bucks] School Board who in turn contacted Mrs. Marian Francofiera (the Principal of Doylestown Borough School) and my Mother.” (1)



Doylestown Borough High School

“My Mother spearheaded the setup of the Clinic, coordinating nurses, doctors and community volunteers to help. Dr. Salk was so pleased with how efficient the setup was he asked my Mother if she would help in the setup of other Clinics. It was the first organized and successful Polio Inoculation Clinic. The clinic was established in the Doylestown Borough School [Broad & Court Streets] because it was in the center of Doylestown and the community could easily get to it. It was still an active school for the children in the Borough, grades K-12. The clinic may have been opened for as long as two weeks. The shots were given

to the youth of the community and then anyone else who wanted to receive it. All were invited.” (1)

Gladys received degrees from Mercy Douglass School of Nursing (now part of University of Pennsylvania), West Chester University, and Trenton State College. She spent most of her 32-year career as school nurse in the Central Bucks School District, retiring in 1983. Nancy adds: “My Mother was involved in Easter Seals and the Red Cross. Plus, her School Nursing job where over the years she gained five more schools in the Central Bucks School District by her

retirement. My Mother was a busy lady but always had time for her family. She loved working with the Youth and helping where needed.” (1)

Gladys, who died in 2003, is buried next to her husband, Randall, in the Historic Doylestown Cemetery. Randall, his father, and grandfather owned Nelson’s Barber Shop in Doylestown from 1884 until Randall’s death in 1964.

More than 400 million doses of Dr. Salk’s vaccine were distributed between 1955 and 1962. Cases of polio in the United States dropped from 14,647 in 1955 to 5,894 in 1956, and continued to fall rapidly to less than 100 per year in the 1960s, by the 1970s there were fewer than 10 cases a year. Since 1979, no cases of polio have originated in the U.S., unfortunately there have been several cases acquired outside the U.S. and “imported” then transmitted to unvaccinated children (the last time this happened was 1993). Polio remains endemic in only two countries Afghanistan and Pakistan. “Until poliovirus transmission is interrupted in these countries, all countries remain at risk of importation of polio, especially vulnerable countries with weak public health and immunization services and travel or trade links to endemic countries.” (2)

There is no cure for polio, one in 200 infections leads to irreversible paralysis. In 2018, there were an estimated 500,000+ polio survivors in the U.S. The World Health Organization estimates there are 10-20 million polio survivors worldwide, many of whom suffer from the disabling late effect of polio, known as Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS).

World Polio Day, October 24, was established by Rotary International to commemorate the birth of Jonas Salk, born in 1914, and to bring awareness to the efforts to eradicate polio world-wide. Rotary International and the World Health Organization (WHO) launched the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) in 1988 which, as of 2013, has reduced polio worldwide by 99%.

More information about [Polio History](#) and [Polio Eradication](#)

Sources:

(1) Nancy Nelson

(2) Polioeradication.org

Additional sources:

poliotoday.org published by the Salk Institute for Biological Studies; CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention); WHO (World Health Organization); Rotary International
Gladys Nickleby Nelson (1921-2003)



Saddle shoes, spring dresses, rolled up jeans and all, a group of elementary school children pose for a photo after receiving polio vaccinations as part of a massive clinical test in 1954.

Inset on the photo is a “Polio Pioneer” button given to all the children along with a certificate. March of Dimes photo



A group of mothers with their children wait outside a clinic for polio vaccinations.
FOX PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES