

A Story of Unbelievable Resilience and Determination

About Jean Maddalena Rathgeber written by her son, Michael



Jean with her family namesake, "Lena"

Jean Alcamo was born in 1928. One hot summer day in 1930, she was brought down to a swimming pool in Newark NJ to cool off and go for a swim. The two year old was told not to dunk her head in the water.

A few days after that day all of the 19 children who swam in that swimming pool began to get sick....very sick. Jean also began exhibiting symptoms, such as a stiff neck and significant weakness on the entire right side of her body. Sadly, some of the children began dying. It turns out the pool was not chlorinated enough and all the children, including Jean, contracted the dreaded disease . . . Polio.

Jean's grandparents had heard about a very experimental treatment plan which involved a hypodermic needle injection into the base of the spine with a solution of a particular snake venom that was resulting in favorable outcomes in reversing some of the neurological damage from polio. The cost for the injection was 50 dollars and in post Depression America that was considerably more money than most working families could afford, but Jean's family found a way to get the money, and Jean ended up getting the shot.

Within 21 days Jean began to get some use of the left side of her body back again. It looked like the miracle drug was indeed a miracle. Upon her unlikely recovery she was fitted for a thigh to ankle leather brace on her legs to help her with walking. Sadly at the same time, 17 of the 19 children who contracted polio from that swimming pool had not survived. Only Jean and another boy survived. It turns out those two children who survived are the only two who didn't submerge their heads in the pool water. (Whether that was a factor in their survival or not will never be known but it certainly is an interesting sidebar).

Jean's challenges from her survival would only be starting however. There was so much misunderstanding, misinformation, and misconceptions over what polio was and how it effected those stricken, that it inadvertently created much unnecessary stress for the people who were fortunate enough to survive. My grandfather left my Mom and my Grandmother dry when he found out his daughter had polio. My grandmother had to go out and work two jobs to keep afloat. My great grandparents adopted my Mom so they could legally care for her. It was then that my mother became a Maddalena. (When I became a father, I named my daughter Maddalena to honor the selflessness of my great grandparents). Jean was told she could not attend a traditional elementary school as she was physically and probably mentally challenged as well and therefore needed to go to a special needs school. Her family resisted fiercely and won the battle. Jean attended a public elementary school where she flourished academically and socially. Again the "experts" felt she should go to a special needs high school and again her family resisted and won and Jean attended a mainstream public high school where she took a pre CPA course of study and graduated from high school with high honors.

After high school Jean applied for a job at American Airlines and Trans World Airlines where pre employment physicals were required. The physician recommended not hiring her due to her potential physical limitations. Jean fought the decision and eventually was hired by TWA. She worked for them in



Four generations of Rathgebers – Mike, his daughter Malissa, grandson Maverick and Jean

the airline terminal for four years. Jean married Edwin Rathgeber. Against her doctors advice had two children. She had an outstanding career at St Peters College, in Jersey City, NJ. She worked both at the college and for the Dept of the Army on campus ROTC unit, also at St Peters College.

One of her proudest moments came when after being told for most of her life she will never be able to drive a car, she got a specially modified car for driving, took lessons and got her driving license. This gave her more independence then she ever felt possible and she loved just going out for a Sunday drive

In 1984 she visited polio expert Dr. Lauro Halstead in Houston Texas who told her it was likely her post-polio syndrome symptoms were going to increase in intensity and to prepare for a life of much less mobility. Unfortunately his prediction was correct and some of her falls resulted in significant injuries (including a broken knee cap). But she was bound and determined to not be a victim and instead to persevere and persevere she did. Following that diagnosis of Post Polio Syndrome she went on to care for her husband who was suffering from congestive heart failure. After he died, she went into business with her son where they owned and operated a highly successful Cafe/deli/catering business on Cape Cod.

My mother has now celebrated her 91st birthday and although the ravages of post polio syndrome have left her mostly bed ridden, she remains determined to live life to the fullest while watching her grandchildren and great grandchildren grow up.

Jean is an inspiration to all who have to deal with this dreaded disease and she refuses to let it bring her down or limit what she can and cannot do. I know this firsthand as I witnessed much of it and am very proud and fortunate to call Jean my Mom.

