



## Polio, COVID, Compassion and Understanding

Because we are actively engaged with Rotarians, we often see current photos of struggling polio survivors from the most war torn corners of the world. What we rarely see is the reality of what happened here in the US and abroad, not so very long ago.

Our correspondence has more than doubled since this pandemic began. Much of it has been recording and responding to the true compassion and empathy that polio survivors have for those currently experiencing COVID19. Sadly, another piece is the fears that are re-emerging from those who understand first hand what it is to have experienced another insidious virus that has killed or permanently disabled millions of children and young adults all over the world.

As polio "long haulers", the vast majority of us - even those who experienced the most "mild" cases - are living with the lifelong, damaging effects that the virus (long gone from our bodies) left in its wake. We survived. We lived. Polio has no cure and we are truly grateful that it is now a vaccine preventable disease.

We have all seen photos of hospitalized COVID patients looking out of hospital windows. We have heard time and time again that a virus can spread even when the infected person has minimal or no symptoms. We have heard concern that the hospitals could be "overwhelmed". We are now hearing the word "long haulers" being associated with the potential long term effects in those who recover from COVID19. Only history will be able to tell our health care professionals the truth as to what damage this virus is leaving in its path of destruction. We only need to read about the survivors actively engaged in our network to understand the empathy. Pools and schools were closed. Children left with leg braces and crutches were ostracized. Families waited hours in line for the precious vaccine. Fear reigned.

- Jim was completely paralyzed from the neck down at age two. The hospital(s) were "overwhelmed" with polio patients. His parents were told to take him home, live in quarantine and do the best they could. His little brother (an infant) was quarantined on the next floor. The entire neighborhood knew that polio was in that house and once he recovered, no one would befriend the "cripple".
- Deb was completely paralyzed on her right side at age five. The local clinic was full. After a spinal tap, her parents were told to take her to a hospital 100 miles away. They left their frightened, paralyzed little girl with strangers and were told they could only see her on weekends. For the first four weeks (while she was quarantined) they drove 200 miles round trip so they could wave to her through a window from the parking lot. Once she was out of quarantine, they made the same weekly drive for five more months, to visit their permanently paralyzed little girl.
- Joe woke up at age five, partially paralyzed from the waist down. He was in the hospital for two years, and was left alone to learn how to navigate with the double braces and double crutches that would become his new "normal". He did this without his family except for one brief weekly visit (once the quarantine period was over).
- Roger was 12 when he became ill. Because the hospitals were overflowing he was not taken to the hospital. After a three-week battle with the virus, much of his right side was paralyzed and he was finally taken to the hospital. Because there were no open beds, his parents were told to leave their son in the "garage" building next door.
- Sally had only a "mild", viral like illness. No one knew that she could be inadvertently spreading the poliovirus. No one will ever know if she did. As a "long hauler", the virus caused untold damage and she requires the use of a wheelchair on a daily basis.
- Daniel's mother, not permitted to visit, refused to be parted from her five year old son. She got a job working in the hospital kitchen.
- Josephine had a "mild" case of polio at four. She recovered completely and had fond memories of playing in the public rooms and gardens of the Roosevelt Whitehouse. At age 35, her life changed as her gradual muscle weakness became significant. She became fully dependent on her powerchair.

- Charlotte, ill at age nine, was diagnosed with Rheumatic fever. Two days later her legs were completely paralyzed. It was polio.
- John was only two when he was confined to an iron lung for 15 months. He went home with a partially paralyzed left arm. At age five, after being hit by a car, the arm was broken. The doctor saw no need to set it as “he’s already crippled anyway”. The arm was now permanently paralyzed. At age 14, he got polio again. He spent nine months in an iron lung. Twice he fell, twice he got up again.
- Arlene was eight when she was taken alone into a dark room where a spinal tap was given to the young, frightened child. It was polio. For fear of exposure to the virus, the ambulance would not take Arlene and another little girl to the hospital. Because the other little girl’s parents owned a funeral home, they were taken to the hospital in a hearse.
- Diane was eight when she had trouble tying her shoes. Later that day, she was sent home from school because of pain. The doctor said she was “seeking attention”. The next day, her grandfather took her to another doctor. Polio. She was taken by ambulance, far from her home, to a hospital for crippled children and placed in an isolation ward. THAT was where she discovered that the pit of fear has no bottom. She was totally alone. The lives of Diane, her brothers and sister and her parents were forever changed with one word. Polio. Immediately, the neighbors withdrew because of “fear”. Her father (active military) was restricted to his base because of “fear”. It was a fear that her entire family carried the disease.
- Nancy was six when she came down with a high fever and a stiff neck. The next thing she knew, she was alone in an ambulance bound for a hospital at the other end of the county. She barely remembers weeks in isolation, where nurses and doctors wearing face masks came and went. There were so many hours with steaming hot packs on her legs that she’ll never forget the smell of wet wool. Sixty years later, she can clearly remember the awful pain of the spinal tap that confirmed the polio diagnosis. “No wonder we polio survivors are so brave and fearless.”

And the stories go on and on. With these stories comes compassion and empathy for what's happening all around us today. With these stories comes hopeful anticipation that COVID19 will be the next vaccine preventable disease. With these stories comes gratitude beyond words for the infrastructure that has been created by Rotary International and their partners in the [GPEI](#), not only to end polio, but to embrace the much larger, worldwide focus of Disease Prevention and Treatment and the importance of vaccination.

History . . . It’s something that we will all be a part of years from now.  
History will tell the story.

We are hopeful that history will point to the time when COVID19 was announced as eradicated.

Why?

Because *no one* should suffer from a vaccine preventable disease.  
The pain and disability CAN last a lifetime.

The PA Polio Network Team  
[www.papolionetwork.org](http://www.papolionetwork.org)