

Harry Donahue, A Familiar Voice From Radio, has a 70-year-old Virus Story To Tell: “The New Polio”

Foreward by: [Mike Jensen, Philadelphia Inquirer](#)

“Over the weekend, Harry Donahue sat in his den in Southampton, Bucks County, ‘hunkered down a little bit and hoping for better times.’ Sitting there, the longtime Temple sports radio play-by-play man thought back to a time when the world frantically searched for another vaccine, and it didn’t arrive quite in time to help Harry Donahue.

Donahue is not the ‘woe is me’ type. If people ask him about his uneven gait, he usually just tells them he’d tripped over something the other day. He used to tell the truth, Donahue said, but he didn’t want people feeling bad, hearing this guy had been stricken with polio when he was 2 years old, so he found it easier to tell a version of a white lie.

His friends and family knew. What Donahue thought about in his den, this global coronavirus pandemic spreading -- he wished his own parents were still alive, so they could tell his nine grandchildren a little about what it was like to have a 2-year-old with a virus that killed hundreds of thousands of people, before this man named Jonas Salk developed a vaccine, available a half-decade after Harry’s diagnosis.

He thinks his parents could calm everybody down a bit, let them know about the sunny days off in the distance. Donahue has one of the most familiar voices in this city. He had been KYW Radio’s morning man for 35 years until his 2014 retirement. He still is the radio voice of Temple football and basketball, and was put in Temple’s athletic ring of honor earlier this year.

Thinking about how his own parents handled everything in 1950, Donahue put some words to paper -- or to a screen -- sending his thoughts to friends.

“I still have memories of lying in a bed in Philadelphia’s Municipal Hospital,” Donahue wrote. “My parents were allowed brief visitations over the course of the month I was in there. They and my brother were in semi-quarantine in our home ...’ Home was in the Olney section of Philadelphia. ‘... as I lay in that hospital room with as many as four other children who had been diagnosed with the virus.’

Let’s stop and imagine the fear Donahue’s parents must have had. Polio was a killer, and Donahue noted that his later research showed the number of cases in Philadelphia in 1950 was the highest in history. He noted how the trust they had to place in medical professionals was immense.

He made it out of the hospital. Two years later, the braces on his legs came off. ‘My parents never helicoptered me,’ Donahue said over the phone. ‘I think it left an impression. To try everything you can. Grind it out every day. Don’t fall back on, ‘You know what, I’m a polio victim, I shouldn’t be expected to do this ...’ ‘Stickball, touch football, basketball -- whatever the neighborhood kids played, Harry played. ‘They normalized every bit of my life,’ Donahue said. ‘They refused to overprotect me. They were survivors in every way. Children of the Depression whose own parents had taken on the loss of jobs and businesses and came out those tunnels ready for the next challenge.’

And he knew that limp, and surgeries he endured, didn’t compare to the girl three blocks away, a bit older, sentenced by polio to a wheelchair for her shorter life. Donahue isn’t a “get off my lawn” type any more than “woe is me.” He just knows his parents hid their scars and their fears raising him.

That limp? Harry just tripped over something the other day. He’s fine, ready to wait out this virus, then get back on a golf course, reschedule that trip to Florida he was supposed to take with friends. Don’t worry about him.”

Continued . . .



The New Polio: What Would Mom and Dad Have Done?

By Harry Donohue

I wish my parents were alive right now. So that I could hear all about the decisions they had to make, the fears they experienced and the trust they had in medical professionals when I was diagnosed at age two, with Poliomyelitis in 1950.

At the time there was no vaccine. The number of cases in Philadelphia that year was the highest in history. There was no explanation as to why I got it but my older brother did not.



I still have memories of lying in a bed in Philadelphia's Municipal Hospital. My parents were allowed brief visitations over the course of the month I was there. They and my brother were under a semi-quarantine in our home as I lay in that hospital room with as many as four other children who had been diagnosed with the virus.

I vividly recall when they would bring toys with them and stuffed animals. I even remember them waving goodbye to me when their visits would end. And sometimes one or two of the older children in the room would try to get my attention by calling me a "dumb bell". Chalk it up as my first experience with bullying.

I never got the chance to hear in my parents own words what it was like for them. Looking back on it, I'm amazed at their ability to live that experience and carry on. They did have a lot in their favor.

Four year old Harry Donahue

They had supportive family members and friends. They trusted their doctors, and above all, they were people of great faith. Thank goodness they did not have the distractions of "dooms day" predictions or prognosis from social media and "talking heads". Somehow, though, even if they did, Betty and Harry Donahue, would have discreetly dismissed such opinions and stayed the course.

When I left the hospital and returned home, I was visited weekly by a physical therapist who put me thru a rigorous exercise program while I wore a leg brace that weighed one quarter as much as I did.

With the brace removed I did leg pumps on our dining room table trying to restore some muscle mass in my atrophied right calf. With the brace on, the therapist would guide me along a seam in our living room rug trying to maintain balance while walking a straight line. In between visits, my mother would do the same while never displaying a "woe is me" attitude. There wasn't time for self pity.

Almost two years later, the brace came off. I could almost walk a straight line. My parents knew I'd never be an Olympic sprinter, but that never discouraged them, and in the process, it did not discourage me.

To the contrary, I never heard either of them say "You can't do that" or "Why don't you try something else" whenever I wanted to play stick ball, touch football or basketball with neighborhood friends. They normalized every bit of my life. They refused to over protect me. They were survivors in every way. Children of the depression whose own parents had taken on the loss of jobs and businesses and came out of those tunnels ready for the next challenge.

They had scars and they had fears. But they overcame each and every one in a silent demonstration of hope, trust and love. That is the legacy of Betty and Harry Donahue and the legacy of thousands like them. We can only pray that their response 70 years ago can inspire today's generation of parents.



Harry Donahue, on a "pre" polio trip to the beach with his mother and older brother.

Continued . . .



A young Harry Donahue and his father.

So thanks Mom and Dad for what you did. For guiding me through my Polio virus experience. Yes, I wish you were here now to share your wisdom and strength. But though you are certainly missed, I have to believe somewhere there are parents just like you. Similar in their own way at being that guiding light to their children, family and friends.

Your loving son,
Harry Jr.



Editor's Note:

We were so happy to see that Harry Donohue had shared his story with the [Philadelphia Inquirer](#). As a life long Philadelphia area resident, the first time I saw Harry Donohue on his show "Inside Golf", I recognized his voice immediately.

A few months later, after discovering that he too was a polio survivor, I had the opportunity to meet him. When I asked if we could publish his story he was reluctant at best. It was early on in our PPSN work, and I had yet to realize just how difficult it could be for polio survivors to share their stories. He chose to do so at a truly historical time in our lives.

Sports enthusiasts from the Philadelphia, PA area and beyond, will find his professional history interesting.

A "Broadcast Pioneer" of Philadelphia, Harry's moving tribute to his parents is especially timely and we are grateful he has shared it with us, along with so many family photos. "One of Philadelphia's most recognizable voices, Harry first joined KYW News radio as a freelance reporter/anchor in 1974 and since 1979, Harry's been a morning news and sports anchor for the station until his retirement in the summer of 2014". (1)



"Donahue had big dreams of playing in the Big 5 but soon found the broadcasting route was a better one to pursue. He began working with Temple in 1984, broadcasting Owls football games. In 2002, Donahue became the play-by-play voice of Temple men's basketball." (1)

"Harry Donahue has been Philadelphia's morning jolt for over 30 years. Since 1979, he's helped Philadelphians wake up as the morning anchor for top-rated KYW News Radio." As a life-long golfer and on-air personality, Donahue brings the perfect combination of links, love and media savvy to "[Inside Golf](#)." (2)(3)

His sports reporting has won him two Pennsylvania Associated Press Awards for his coverage of the Philadelphia Phillies' playoff and World Series victories in 1980. In May 2000, Donahue was inducted into the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame. He was inducted into [Temple Basketball's Ring of Honor](#) in 2020.

Harry is a native Philadelphian who attended St. Joseph's Prep, St. Charles Borromeo Seminary and St. Joseph's University.



Footnotes:

- (1) <https://kywnewsradio.radio.com/articles/news/harry-donahue-inducted-into-temple-basketball-ring-of-honor>
- (2) <https://www.broadcastpioneers.com/harrydonahue.html>
- (3) <http://www.insidegolf.net/about-us/>

Continued . . .



Harry Donahue and his family, as he was inducted into Temple Basketball's "Ring of Honor" February, 2020



Six of Harry Donahue's nine grandchildren – in front of the banner honoring their grandfather at the Liacouras Center at Temple University.



Harry Donahue, doing an [Inside Golf](#) TV show on location at the PGA Merchandise Show in Orlando, FL



Harry Donahue "on the air" at Philadelphia's KYW Radio 1060.