

Walk A Mile In My Shoes

By Joe Randig

I think I am 6 years old in this picture and these would have been my first pair of orthopedic shoes. This picture was taken in the spring of 1953 about 8 months after I got polio. When looking at the photo a few years ago I noticed my right shoe didn't have a lift and both shoes are the same size. I imagine the lift was put on and increased gradually as I grew. I just always remember a 2" lift.

I probably didn't give much thought to my plain brown shoes in the beginning. I was just happy to be on my feet and walking. When you're a kid in an orthopedic hospital or under outpatient care you don't have any say in anything regarding your care and rehab. Nobody ever asked "What do you think of these shoes Joe? How do you like them?" Nothing changed over the next 10 years other than replacing my shoes every few years and increasing the depth of my lift on the right shoe.

I remember always having Alden shoes. Eventually I was able to get them in black which was a slight improvement. Alden shoes were rigid and unforgiving; I guess that was necessary to support weak and compromised polio feet but they were always uncomfortable from calluses caused by my deformed left foot. As I grew my feet also grew. Well, at least my left foot grew but my right foot didn't grow much. The good thing about Alden was that we could buy a pair of shoes in different sizes so I didn't wind up with 4 shoes, 2 of which I didn't know what to do with. If you can trust what you see on the internet, Alden shoes are still in business.

I was always under the impression that I must have these orthopedic shoes because they had a steel plate built inside between the sole and the heel which enabled the attachment of the stirrup. Later in life I learned that that was not true. When I was 15 years old, I was in Shriners Hospital for surgery on both legs. Since I had stopped growing it was time for new braces and shoes. I came out of the hospital with exactly what every 15 year old boy does *not* want; a pair of ugly brown, high top shoes - the kind my grandfather wore all his life. I wore the brown high top shoes for 6 or 7 years through high school, post education and my wedding. I always felt embarrassed by them. Finally as an adult I could buy my own shoes so I went back to Aldens. My feet were still a challenge and I needed good support but no more high tops. Those Alden shoes lasted for years. I probably still have a few way in the back of the closet.

Eventually Alden stopped making the size I needed for my small foot. 20 some years ago I started going to a new orthotist and he told me about custom-made molded shoes. I had never heard of these but it sounded like something that might work for me. My first experience was very poor. The orthotist made the mold by wrapping each foot with an Ace bandage coated with a solution that hardens as it air dries. While it is semi hard they cut it off (the wrap material, not my foot) and there you are, a perfect mold of my foot. At least that's what you would think. The right foot shoe was so tight I couldn't wear it and the left was shaped like an "S" since my foot is deformed. It looked a little strange. The orthotist didn't make the shoes. He was the middle man who shipped the molds off to the shoe maker so I had no personal contact with the shoe maker. The company did remake the shoes and I'm still using the right shoe but I never did wear the left shoe.

Custom made molded shoes sounds like the perfect solution but for the last 15 years, it has been a frustrating process. I found a shoe maker closer to where I live so I took a chance on his shoe making abilities. The first pair of shoes he made were good. They felt great and I had no more sore calluses. He used a different process for making the molds thus creating a

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better fitting shoe but his business practices were frustrating. He requires payment in full up front; and it can take 3 to 4 months to finish the shoes. He will NOT remake a shoe but he will make changes to a shoe if necessary. Custom molded shoes are usually made for diabetics and insurance does cover them but it is a fight to get insurance coverage when the shoes are required for orthopedic reasons.

This shoe maker will turn in an insurance claim but if it is denied he will not fight for payment since he has already been payed by the customer. If the customer wants reimbursed for the cost of their shoes they are in for a battle with the insurance company. My last custom made shoe cost \$450.00 and that was just one shoe.

I have experienced foot and ankle pain for the past 40 years. At times it would be so bad I could barely put any weight on my foot. Daily foot wrapping with an Ace bandage or sport tape had become a constant necessity. A few years ago I had had enough and went to an orthopedic foot and ankle surgeon. After an exam and X-rays he told my that nothing could be done surgically to relieve my foot pain. Back in the 1950's when we were children they did a lot of muscle and tendon realignment surgery on polio feet. Our doctors knew that our feet were in for a lifetime of complications. Regrettably, I never had that surgery.

Eventually I returned to the dreaded high top shoe which is on my left "good" foot and a regular shoe with a 2" lift with a brace attachment on my right foot. I never liked my shoes and am a little embarrassed by them but I always felt bad for the girls needing those frumpy orthopedic shoes. Shoes are more of a fashion accessory for females so those shoes could present a whole different set of insecurities to overcome.

When I die and go to heaven (if I'm lucky) one of the first things I'm going to do is go to a shoe store and buy their best shoes. I think I'll get a pair of black wing tips for dress and reddish brown slip-ons for casual wear. My new shoes will be stylish and shiny. They will be the same size with no lift or brace attached. I might even get a pair of sandals.

Joe Randig



Note: Joe Randig has written a series of wonderful survivor stories.

His work "[The Witness Trees](#)" was picked up and published by the [Pittsburgh Post Gazette](#).

You will find them in the [Survivor Connections](#) section of our website.