

## This Is My Story

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Sixty years ago, I made my entrance into this world. I was so anxious to get here that I arrived three months early and weighed less than two pounds. In the days before NICUs, just surviving was a feat in itself. When the doctors told my parents to go home and forget about this child because she will never survive, they had no idea of the force they were reckoning with. I persevered and soon gained enough weight to come home to my parents and four siblings.

Polio has always been a part of my life. Having contracted the disease when I was 15 months old, I have never known my body to be any different. There is no story to tell about suffering through the actual disease because, thankfully, I was too young to remember any of it. Growing up, I faced the same problems that some of you have faced (surgeries, braces, physical therapy and accessibility problems prior to the ADA) and I struggled through them the same way you have – putting one foot in front of the other and just doing the best I could. But, growing up I had wonderful experiences too. In grade school, I might not have been able to ride a bike or jump rope, but I had best friends, sleepovers, choir and Girl Scouts. High School experiences included glee club, dances, and various clubs, dating and having fun with friends. There were a lot of things that I missed because of my physical limitations, but as I look back, the majority of my memories are filled with good times and great friends.

I married a wonderful man, raised an amazing daughter and had a successful career. I also found time to do the things that I felt were important to my child. Because there

were many physical things that I couldn't do like other mothers could with my child, I resolved to be there in other ways. I was the room mother, the Girl Scout Leader and the first to volunteer if help was needed at school just as my mother had done for me. I had to work harder to do any job, but I was determined that I could and would do it all. At the time, I had never heard of PPS and didn't know that my physical ability and energy would run out as quickly as it happened. But I must confess, even if I had known, I would not have changed a thing.

Time marches on and just having celebrated a "big" birthday a few months ago, I find that my legs (even the good one that I've always been able to count on) sometimes don't want to cooperate. Because of my diminished leg strength, I fall more, don't get up as easily and find sitting in a chair without arms is almost impossible to rise from. The time has come for me to occasionally use a wheelchair or a scooter, but I worry that using them will make my legs even weaker. Although I have had numerous surgeries on my leg and foot, as I age, I find that my back (because of the way I walk) is giving me the most problems. After two back surgeries, a third has been advised. But, because I've had trouble with bones healing, for now, I just try to slow down and take things a little easier. If I'm having a good day, I still tend to pull out the vacuum and clean the house or tackle that closet that I've been meaning to get to for months. It's hard to change old habits.

When I was growing up, the fact that I had polio was never mentioned or discussed in our home. It was the unspoken elephant in the room. Older siblings tell me that I was paralyzed from the neck down on both sides of my body and that I had treatment at Children's Hospital in Los Angeles. They also recount the fact that my mother feared having me vaccinated because people were getting polio from the vaccine and since I was weak from having been born prematurely, she was too afraid to take that chance.

As I grew older and my parents aged, I was hesitant to ask them questions about the illness. The fact that I had a disease that left me with a visible handicap was something my parents felt so badly about they couldn't discuss it with me. That became the new unspoken elephant between us. They have since passed, so the answers to my questions are buried with them. I regret I didn't have the courage to bring up the subject when my questions might have been answered. This regret is not only for myself, but also for them. I would have liked to tell them that I was ok with their decision and they should be too. They were good parents, did the best they could, and the fact that I had polio was no one's fault – just the luck of the draw – as it was for all of us.

Regardless of the differences in our lives and the uniqueness of our physical abilities, we all share a chapter in the polio story. We all deal with it in different ways and come to terms with it in our own time. Nevertheless, it runs through each of us and binds us to the other. We all carry its battle scars in one way or another and we should all be proud of those scars. They have helped make us what we are today – courageous, brave and stronger than anyone would ever imagine. ■