

Mona Randolph

Mark Randolph, Kansas City, Missouri

Mona Jean Randolph passed away February 18, 2019 from long delayed effects of polio. Polio had left Mona with minimal use of her right arm and hand, none of her left, little leg strength, and very little vital capacity. She was in a wheelchair during the day and an iron lung at night. So, summing up 82 years of a rich, full life in 50 words:

1. Mona survived polio.
2. She was an energetic and effective advocate for the disabled (see a curb cut, think of Mona).
3. She married a husband, to whom she gave great joy, and who loved her dearly in return.
4. She lived independently for 46 years, while continually ministering to others.

How did she do that?

Onset, Recovery and a New Normal

In 1956, Mona was 20 years old and on the cusp of womanhood, but on one September afternoon that year, she had a headache. When she got home, the headache was worse. She went right to her room. Light hurt her eyes, so her mother drew the blinds. Three days later, returning from the bathroom, she had trouble walking. That afternoon, she had trouble breathing. She was rushed to St Luke's hospital. It was polio. They put her in an iron lung. They saved her life.

Six months later, in the Spring of 1957, Mona was sufficiently recovered to travel to Warm Springs, Georgia. She described her state of mind as "numbed bewilderment." She thought if she followed doctor's orders, worked hard, and with persistence and determination, she would be able to resume her life.

Warm Springs had tremendous experience with those stricken with polio, and all they knew was invested in Mona. She worked hard, and regained much, but no one at Warm Springs promised a full recovery. After seven months at Warm Springs, Mona had grown homesick, so she persuaded the review board of her progress, reminding them that on arrival she could only scratch her nose. They were impressed. They released her to her new life.

For a decade and a half, Mona lived with her family and they found a "a new normal." Fortunately, her family was stable, well-rooted in church and community, so they had abundant support. Her mother was a dynamic person with many friends. Her father was a devoted provider and faithful caretaker. Her brother Dick was best friend and confidante, someone she could depend on for understanding and good humor.

Mona attended friends' showers, weddings, baptisms and funerals. She worked at small part-time jobs: TV monitoring, a greeting card and invitation business, entering advertising contests (and winning a few). She also read and studied with limitless curiosity. She enjoyed going where her mind took her—no assignments, no tests, no grades, just the satisfaction of unbounded, independent, unstructured learning. Her most active life was imagining her own apartment and transportation, a meaningful career and marriage. She thought these nothing but daydreams, but they whetted an appetite for a larger purpose driven life.

A Search for Faith

A dear friend entered her life, and with his help, Mona confronted the truth of her reality. This emotional stimulation, and subsequent emotional confusion when he left, catapulted Mona into a search for meaning and purpose. Mona began wrestling with her faith, what to believe about God. Her background had prepared her for this search. She had an active Church life growing up. In college, she had courses on comparative religions. Her broad reading had exposed her to wider philosophies and thinking.



Mona at Warm Springs, 1956.

This search culminated in a crisis. A pulmonary infection caused her to choke, and in that moment, she turned to God, “If you are real, you had better do something or I am going to die.” She took a tiny sip of air, discovered she was clear, and gave herself over to God completely.

Advocacy

Mona had shunned others who were disabled, but that changed. In the mid-1960s, Mona found a funky little rehab newsletter called the *Toomey J. Gazette* filled with stories of people like her doing improbable things like running businesses from an iron lung. Mona then met other disabled people—and on fire

for the Lord—began to prod them. “We can do better than drink beer, chat and play games,” she insisted.

They contacted the National Paraplegic Foundation and became a chapter. Within five years, they achieved two goals: compiling and distributing a guide on accessibility to architects and obtaining a city ordinance requiring curb cuts. The chapter evolved into The Whole Person, a dynamic organization which still exists as an advocate for all individuals with disabilities in Kansas City. Subsequently,

Mona served on the board of the Coalition for Independence which coordinated direct assistance to the disabled, and she volunteered at Abounding Love, a church-sponsored ministry to the developmentally disabled.

Her Life’s Work

In 1972, Mona would lose the only provider she had ever known—her father—to cancer. The family home would be sold. Mona and her mother would move into a co-op, with consequent distancing from the church and community of which they had always been a part. Soon thereafter, her mother received a marriage proposal and wrestled with how to care for a daughter she thought forever dependent.



Mona in her iron lung, 1980s

Mona perceived an opportunity. Paraphrasing her thoughts, “After much consultation with God, and counting the personal cost as realistically as possible, I determined to stay in Kansas City and establish a household of believers as an experiment designed both to meet resident’s needs and to demonstrate the desirability of Christian precepts for healthful, peaceful living.” She would live independently.

This was not met with universal family acclaim.

Mona’s ability to care for herself was limited to self-feeding and brushing her teeth. Tasks like writing, typing or telephoning required help. It took a month of negotiation with her mother, with supposedly good friends advising, “She should be put in a nursing home,” “She can’t possibly do it,” and “It will never work.” In the end, Mona’s mother would get married, and Mona would buy a house at 55th and Oak in Kansas City, two blocks from a vibrant church named Agape.

That first year had times when Mona did not know where her next bedpan would come from (one morning, a stranger appeared out of a snow storm to help), but God always provided, such that “It was sometimes hard on my nerves, but that year was good for my faith.”

God’s Promise

And then, she got married! Early on, the Lord had told Mona she would have a husband. She did not understand how that could happen, but was obedient, and began practical reading and study to prepare herself if it came to pass, which it did.

God gave Mona a life partner, a soul mate, someone she could cherish, and nurture, and comfort, and uplift, and love with all her heart. Someone who would love her with all his heart, and cherish, and nurture, and comfort, and uplift. Someone to care for her all the days of her life.

In Mona’s words, “All that the locusts had eaten, had been restored. God is faithful. God keeps his promises.” ■



At home in Kansas City, 1970s.