

Not a Poster Child

Francine Falk-Allen

The March of Dimes was a campaign initiated to pay for polio vaccinations and patient care. Most victims of polio were small children, the most prone to severe aspects of the disease. Little children with smiling faces, braces and Kenny sticks were portrayed on coin collection placards with a hundred slots for dimes, or on posters with a jar for money attached. These promos implored donors to send in “even a dime”—the equivalent of ninety cents today.



I saw the placards in stores, gas stations, anywhere that people might be spending or receiving change. This is how the term “poster child” was born, though it has come to mean “a perfect example.”

Once an older child at church stopped me in the hallway and said, “I saw your picture on the March of Dimes poster!”

I was surprised. “I don’t think so ...”

“Yes, it was you!” she insisted. “She had brown hair just like yours!”

Not long after, a kid at school said the same thing. And then a lady in a grocery store kindly bent down and said, “I saw your picture on the March of Dimes poster, dear.”

At that point, no longer a skeptic, I thought that my picture was actually being used by the March of Dimes, and I was a little excited to learn this. I looked forward to seeing myself the next time I saw a placard around town. There I’d be, Francine Allen, the poster

child. But I soon saw that none of the posters had my picture, though the girl was about my age—around six—wore a brace, used Kenny sticks, and had hair similar to mine (although hers was not in the meticulous ringlets my mother created to draw attention away from my limp; I needed to look pretty, Mama’s reasoning went, in order to make up for my defect—a concept I have never been able to drop).

I asked my mother if I was going to be the March of Dimes girl, and she assured me that I wasn’t. I was a little disappointed, but what bothered me more was that people didn’t recognize that it was not me, that any little girl with Kenny sticks and brown hair looked the same to them. It made me a little angry that that was my identity: The March of Dimes Poster Girl. It is possible that people thought, *What a brave little girl*, when they saw that poster, and that they also thought this about me. But I didn’t think of that when I was six. I was just perturbed that I didn’t have a face to people—I was identified by a limp, a brace and crutches.

I was not a poster child—not in reality and not in terms of the smiley, optimistic, never-bothered attitude that is often wished for in disabled people. Others feel better if a crippled person reflects happy accomplishment. Certainly, winsome courage is more appealing for collecting donations! I was also not pathetic or helpless, though the poster was designed to elicit such thoughts. (I am glad people did fund polio vaccination and treatment. I just didn’t like being thought of as pitiful.)

I was not always brave, though I had to be much of the time, and I was not always accepting of my plight, and did not always bear it with a smile, though

I was told in my twenties, “You were always such a happy-go-lucky kid around the neighborhood.”

My mother was concerned that I be taught that I could be the same and do the same as other children, so I would need to try harder than others, not only physically but in all endeavors. This was good news/bad news. It was good to be encouraged, but it was a problem to think I would one day be able to run or dance as an equal, have the energy for normal activities, or be seen as the same as everyone else. There was an underlying message that I needed to be a better person than others in order to be accepted.

I believe my mother was embarrassed to have a handicapped child. If I made mistakes, my parameters were narrower, and my punishment came swifter, because I had something to make up for and there was no room for error. I needed to be perfect. And I was so very far from perfect. ■

Excerpt from *Not a Poster Child: Living Well with a Disability—A Memoir*

Francine Falk-Allen was born in Los Angeles, had polio at age 3, was hospitalized with paralysis for six months, and has lived nearly all of her life in northern California. As a former art major who got a BA in managerial accounting and ran her own business for 33 years, she has always craved creative outlets. This has taken the form of singing and recording with various groups, painting and writing songs, poetry and essays, some of which have been published.

Falk-Allen facilitates Polio Survivors of Marin County, and a Meetup writing group, Just Write Marin County. She was the polio representative interviewed in a PBS/Nobel Prize Media film, *The War Against Microbes*. She loves the outdoors, gardening, pool exercise, her two silly cats, spending time with good friends and her husband, Richard Falk, strong British tea and a little champagne now and then.

www.FrancineFalk-Allen.com; Facebook: Francine Falk-Allen, Author

Not a Poster Child: Living Well with a Disability—A Memoir will be released August 7, 2018 and is available to order at <https://shewritespress.com/shop>, your local bookstore or www.Indiebound.org (which channels funds to local bookstores), www.barnesandnoble.com, or www.Amazon.com.



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