

# POST-POLIO HEALTH

SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

WWW.POST-POLIO.ORG



## What We Were Thinking

Katherine Ott, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

*Ott is the project director and lead curator for the exhibition, "Whatever Happened to Polio?"*

**A**fter three plus years of development, *Whatever Happened to Polio?* has opened at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and on the web ([www.americanhistory.si.edu/polio](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/polio)).

For many people who lived through the epidemic years, polio inhabits a place in the imagination – a mythic, anxious or nostalgic place – a complicated place that the museum had no possibility of re-creating. The hundreds of possible story lines made it frustrating to accept that the exhibition could never be comprehensive, so the reliance upon objects helped us winnow the topics. We did not want to simply repeat what was available in books, because until this year with Wilson and Shell's books (See pages 4 & 5.), most histories of polio concentrate on Salk, Sabin and the vaccines. People who had polio only make cameo appearances for dramatic effect, usually as children and cautionary reminders.

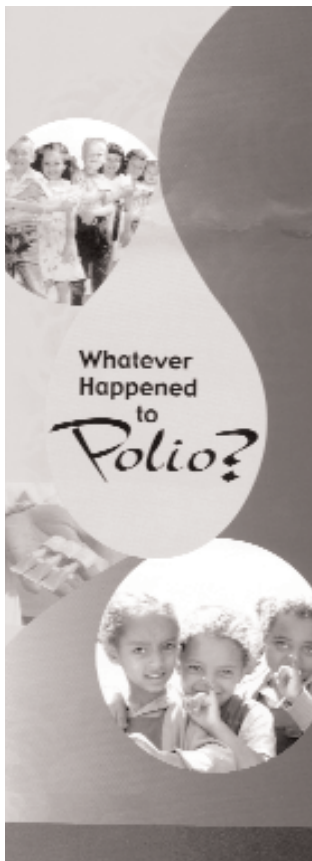
Over time and after many conversations with friends and colleagues in disability studies, it became clear that the people who had had polio would be the counterweight to the story of the medical breakthrough of the Salk vaccine. The vaccine was the occasion for producing the exhibit, but it was only a piece of history. Our plan was to encourage people who had strong memories of polio to step back and re-frame what they know and, secondly, to hook those less than 55 years old on the history of the vaccines, the facts about the disease and on the people who had it.

We wanted to capture the idea that polio was not the worst thing that could happen to a person – people still had to get an education, have a family, a job, and do what everyone else does. Numerous photographs are located along two walls of the gallery, displayed like a family photo album, so their presence is always apparent, wherever you move. (See top of page 3.)

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Presenting topics for which there is a living constituency always adds intensity and heightens the meaning of everything related to a project. This project had urgency to it because of the health of many of the people with whom we worked. In fact, three people who had polio died before the exhibition opened, and they never saw the final product.

We knew people who had lived the history would minutely scrutinize the exhibit to see if we “got it right,” so we decided to use first-person quotations rather than the dispassionate curatorial point-of-view to carry the history. In addition, we had to navigate the intricate politics of polio – the many points of view and competing interests – to show how they all influenced the history of polio.



For curators, gallery behavior is always critical in judging the success of a project. Audience testing early in the polio project revealed that only thirty percent of visitors had an interest in an exhibition on the history of polio. Consequently, we have worked hard to make the exhibit enticing and have put extra money into effective advertising. (See ad at left.)

Because we hired an educator to work in the gallery, lead activities and coordinate the docents, we receive constant feedback. The gallery hands report that many visitors are multi-generational groups. The parents and grandparents can be seen pointing to an object or photograph and leaning over to tell a child about it. Some visitors are talking about personal experiences with their families for the first time. Other visitors are so affected by some aspect of the history that they make a beeline to the educator and spill out the story of their parents or their own childhood or a neighbor. The comment cards are filled with the polio stories of visitors. Needless to say, it is personally gratifying to see how visitors have taken to the exhibit. ●

The online exhibit is at  
[www.americanhistory.si.edu/polio](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/polio).

The website includes more information than the exhibit, including additional photos and activities for children, e.g., a section called “Got Ramps,” an architectural barriers game that demonstrates the changes in accessibility over the years.



*The **Whatever Happened to Polio?** exhibit would not have been possible without the many archival photographs from past issues of the Toomey j. Gazette and Rehabilitation Gazette that Gini Laurie, the founder of Post-Polio Health International, had published over the years. Or at the very least, the exhibit would have ended up very differently without them.*

*A year and a half ago, Joan L. Headley, the current executive director, invited me to the Post-Polio Health International office in Saint Louis, Missouri, where polio survivor Cyndi Jones, San Diego, California, and I poured over a cache of images from the 1950s and 1960s.*

*I was stunned by both the number and content of the photographs and quickly begged Joan to allow the museum to borrow many of them. She agreed, and I selected a hundred or so, not quite knowing how we'd use them. I was convinced of their value in capturing people's lives, such as going to parties and picnics, hanging out with family, getting married, etc. A keepsake album, compiled by her friends at Toomey Pavilion and given to Gini Laurie when she left Cleveland for Saint Louis in 1971, contained many everyday snapshots and informal pictures and planted the seed of the idea for the gallery photo album.*

-Katherine Ott, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

## **Whatever Happened to Polio?**

The triangular kiosks and wall displays in the 2,900-square-foot exhibition asks and answers, with memorabilia and pertinent and poignant quotes, the following questions.

- What Is Polio?
- What Happened in the Epidemics?
- What Do These Devices Do?
- What Is an Iron Lung?
- What Happened after Polio?
- What Did a Dime Do?
- Would a Vaccine Work?
- Will There Always Be Polio?
- How Did Polio Change Us?

The exhibit is located at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History Behring Center and will be on display for the coming year.

