

Teen Polio Survivors Coming of Age in the 21st Century

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Part I: Grace Rossow, Saint Louis, Missouri

Like most American teenagers, fourteen-year-old Grace Rossow of Saint Louis, Missouri, loves going to the movies and hanging out with her friends at the mall. Recently, she has negotiated an arrangement with her parents promising better grades for a cell phone. She misses her two older sisters who are away at college.



Grace, like all eighth graders in her school, is looking forward to the formal dance that will be held to celebrate their middle school graduation. However, whatever Grace chooses to wear for the dance, she will have an accessory that none of the other girls will be wearing. She will be wearing a KAFO leg brace.

Grace had polio when she was nine months old and it significantly affected the muscle control in her left leg. Decorated in a very colorful rainbow plastic and adorned with the signatures of her friends, the brace enables her to walk. Grace is not self-conscious about her brace, although she sometimes tires of the problems and maintenance it requires. Grace welcomes the attention she receives when these problems must be addressed and enjoys her visits to Shriner's Hospital as long as there is no agonizing physical therapy involved.

Born in India, she came to the United States when she was 13 months old and was adopted by the Rossow family. Her mother, Beth, says that following some surgery, Grace learned to walk with her brace at age 2½. She mentions that during her early schooling, Grace had a lot of resources available to her such as a physical therapist provided through the school, free use of arm-controlled bicycles and very supportive school and hospital personnel.

Throughout her school experience, other children have not teased Grace, but have gone out of their way to offer help when it's been needed.

Grace likes working with computers and spending time with her friends. She is frustrated occasionally and feels left out because she is unable to participate in team sports or ski trips. But negativity—about her disability or anything else—is not Grace's style. She prefers to accentuate the positive and enjoys the drama class she is taking in place of Physical Education this year.

A special key enables her to use the elevator at school (when it is working), and she is allowed to leave class early, so that if she needs to take the stairs, she can do so before the rush of other students changing classes.

Grace feels that her disability has afforded her opportunities to meet interesting people and establish close relationships with many of them. She is also not shy about the fact that she had polio and is willing to discuss it with anyone who broaches the subject.

Confident and articulate, Grace is looking forward to starting high school in the fall. After college, she hopes to become a physician so that she not only can heal the sick, but also be compassionate and supportive of others. ▲

Part II: Nazish Rashid, Lahore, Pakistan

Life in Pakistan, a country where many view a physical disability as a shame upon the family and a punishment from God, has not been easy for 16-year-old Nazish Rashid. As a result of having polio at two years of age, she has a weakened and shortened right leg causing her to limp and bow to the right. When she was very young, Nazish wore a leg brace, but because of financial constraints she no longer uses one. Proper medical assistance is either not available or too expensive to pursue. She has had one visit to a rehabilitation center in her city where a surgeon advised corrective surgery to lengthen her leg. The procedure was too costly for her family.

Nazish is in the 10th grade and enjoys movies and plays. She and her friends can spend hours discussing boys and, their favorite topic, the latest fashions. She loves sports and wishes she could participate with her friends. In the classroom, Nazish tends to become shy and keeps to herself. She immerses herself in her studies finding it difficult to be accepted because of the way disabilities are perceived in her society. While some people are sympathetic, she finds that many are superstitious and cautious about befriending someone who has a disability. This has made her feel inferior and self-conscious.

Nazish often chooses not to participate in family and social activities and rarely leaves her home, going out only when her attendance is mandatory. Sometimes this is because she is physically unable to do so due to architectural barriers; other times she chooses not to attend social events because some family members and friends make no secret that they consider her to be a burden.

She is very close to her mother and her brother. Her mother prays for her

recovery daily and blames herself for her daughter's disability. Her brother, Amjad, is protective towards her and often intercedes on her behalf with family members and friends. He uses his computer skills to find information about her disability that will benefit her and coax her back into the mainstream of life.

Most marriages in Pakistan are arranged. It is especially difficult to arrange a marriage for a woman who has a disability. Nazish is fast approaching the age when young girls in her country usually get married. Her family worries that they will not have the financial ability to enter into an arrangement that will come at a higher than normal cost because of their daughter's disability.

Nazish has no idea what the future will hold for her, but she hopes to pursue a career in medicine or teaching. Whatever career Nazish chooses, she will embark upon it with the same determination and strength that she currently gives to her studies. ▲



Nazish at 10 years of age.