

A Tribute to My Mother, Viola Fidler

Connie Pate, Austin, Texas

My mother will celebrate her 100th birthday on September 23, 2017.

The word “survivor” suggests that, somewhere along the way, someone was a “victim.” That’s about the last word I would ever use to describe my mother.

On her 27th birthday in 1944, she woke up feeling as if she was getting the flu and by the next day, her left leg and arm were paralyzed.

At the time, she was a wife and mother to a five-year-old, a two-year-old and a six-month-old. The doctors advised her not to have any more children, but five years later I was born.

My parents lived in rural North Dakota where treatment facilities were few and far between. My mother spent several months in a hospital 100 miles from home wrapped in warm towels and doing hours of physical therapy known then as Sister Kenny treatments.

When the time came for her to have a trial visit at home, she was excited to see her family and vowed to herself (a very strong-willed lady) that she’d show the doctors she could go home for good. She did exactly that!

As long as I lived at home, I never saw her miss a day of doing her “floor exercises” which she learned from the medical staff trained in the methods of Sister Kenny.

When she was 70, I bought her an exercycle which she rode three miles a day until age 88 when she moved into a nursing home.

In addition to being a hard-working farm wife and mother of four, she was president of the Ladies Aid at our church, spearheading several humanitarian initiatives for Baptist missionaries in Africa.

She also volunteered as a counselor at the summer camp sponsored by the church. She was a counselor, my dad ran the candy store, and I was a camper.



As a 14-year-old, it wasn’t that much fun for me!

My mother was always ready to lend a helping hand where she could. She always had an endless supply of Kellogg’s Rice Krispies Treats for her grandchildren, providing them with a fond memory.

She set an incredible example of how to overcome challenges. I knew that anything that I might confront as a child was minor compared to what she overcame as a polio survivor.

She’s also set an amazing example of how to age with grace and dignity and to this day never complains. (Well, maybe a little about the arthritis in her hands!)

As she approaches her 100th birthday, she lives as full a life as any 100-year-old can who’s lived with polio for 73 years.

I swear she wakes up every morning wondering what blessings the day will bring her and is thankful for every one she receives.

In 1944, she happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but she has never thought of herself as a victim or let polio define who she is. ■