

“I’m Still Here”

The year was 1951, late August, when the polio epidemic was rampant across the country. I was a 13-year-old farm girl living near Pigeon Falls, WI, looking forward to being an eighth grader at our local school. When flu-like symptoms progressed to a frightening diagnosis of bulbar polio, my life changed drastically!

An ambulance rushed me from Eau Claire to Madison, WI, where a vacant iron lung waited. Thankfully, oxygen and intravenous feeding helped me survive without an iron lung. After months in hospitals undergoing therapy and making adaptations, I returned home and to school.

Helpful people were key to my survival. My daily farmer parents were supportive, making countless sacrifices and helping keep my attitude optimistic about future plans. The teacher prepared the students for my return to school. Those schoolmates became “first responders” helping me. They carried my lunch tray, picked up dropped pencils and even hoisted me up from unexpected falls. Friends remained friendly with no fear of contracting polio from me. Relatives sent cards and gave encouragement. Our pastor changed the confirmation date so I could participate. Years later, my husband would be understanding of my physical limitations and assist in helping design our home to fit my needs.

The diagnosis of polio did not change me or my goals. My type-A personality helped, never doubting my goals to attend college, become a teacher and raise a family. The qualities of optimism, self-direction, commitment and the feeling that anything is possible prevailed. Although I was bitter at first about why I had polio, this changed later to openness without blame.

During my post-polio years, I have altered several aspects of my life. Routine chiropractor visits, comforting therapeutic massages and regular appointments with a family practitioner are vital to my wellbeing. I've had a hip replacement, prolapsed bladder repair, and cataract surgery. As a direct result of the bulbar polio, my swallowing and choking problems must be dealt with daily. Tough meats, seedy fruits, vegetables, nuts and spicy or overly sweet foods all cause bouts of choking. I eat slowly, chew foods thoroughly, and crush pills. Exercise for my heart problems are a daily requirement. Yes, they're all unwelcome sacrifices, but I'm still here!

Now that I am 80 years old, I continually have to adapt. Currently, I am a widow, mother of three sons, grandmother of ten and a survivor of a serious heart attack. Why am I still here? I remain committed to goals in my work with genealogy, with unending desire to keep learning and with a love for family and friends.

- Mary Herness, Whitehall, Wisconsin

