

What Having a Disability Taught Me

Ida Curtis

I was eighteen years old in 1953 when I contracted polio. After the contagious stage, I was moved to Newington Home and Hospital for Crippled Children in Connecticut for rehabilitation. There I observed that the girls in my ward who complained were slow to receive the service they demanded. I was completely paralyzed and learned that the most effective way to obtain the attention I needed from nurses and aides was to be polite and cheerful. It worked. People often remarked that I always had a smile on my face. I suspect the need to depend upon other people made me a more pleasant person.



Carolers singing to Ida, *Hartford Courant*, 1953



Official presentation of a new hydrocollator to the Newington Home and Hospital for Crippled Children was made recently by members of the Order of the Golden Chain of New Haven. Looking on while Miss Prudence Kurht, head physical therapist, applies the hydrocollator pack to Miss Ida Louks, patient, are, left to right: Mrs. Maurice Rudnick, worthy matron elect; Mrs. Joseph Yudkin, Junior past matron; and Mrs. Ned Shulman, worthy matron of Laurel Link No. 15. *New Haven Register*, 1954.

After two years I had recovered the use of my arms and left the hospital in a wheelchair. In 1956 I married Jared, a fellow high school student with whom I corresponded during my hospital stay and his first two years as a student at Yale University. We soon had two children and I always tried hard to do my share of the work. Maintaining my independence and managing on my own when my husband travelled for his work was important to me.

However, being independent didn't mean that I never asked for help when I needed it. In the 1960s our car was a four-door sedan and I was able to slide in and out of the driver's seat, but, because the door was in the way, I couldn't load or unload my

wheelchair into the back seat. This meant that if I wanted to go shopping by myself, I'd need to find help in the parking lot to unload my wheelchair from the backseat. I'd wait in the car for someone to come by whom I thought would help

me, and then I'd request assistance. When I finished shopping the clerks were always willing to put my groceries, as well as my chair, into the back. It surprises me now at how often I depended on complete strangers for help, and how happy they always seemed to assist me.



First time sitting up, 1955

Now, Jared and I have retired from our jobs and moved to a retirement community in an independent living apartment. There are lots of opportunities for social activities and recreation. I especially enjoy the swimming pool, where there is a lift that I can use to move in and out of the pool. Since many fellow residents struggle with ailments that accompany aging, they often comment on how well I manage a wheelchair. They are surprised when I tell them the reason for my skill is that I have used it for almost sixty years.



Ida and Jared Curtis at Mirabella Seattle, Christmas 2009

For the first time since my days in the hospital I'm living with many people who have disabilities. Aging with a disability brings a new challenge as I fear losing the ability to take care of my personal needs. Because I now struggle with fatigue and sore arms, I have given over washing the dishes at a high sink to my husband. At first I felt guilty about this, but I finally accepted this need for help, telling myself that I still do some of the household work. Using an electric scooter I'm able to do most of the grocery shopping. I especially enjoy this task as it means exploring the city, and I will continue doing it as long as possible.

I wrote about my two years at the Newington Home and Hospital for Crippled Children in My Polio Memoir. It is available from Lulu.com as an eBook.