



**Rancho Los Amigos**

*Post-Polio*

**Support Group**

Newsletter - June 2013

## **Pursuing a Goal When You're Told, "No!"**

Have you ever been rejected because of your disability?

Meet Donna Barras, MD

Reported by Mary Clarke Atwood

Editorial assistance by R. Daggett and D. Barras, MD

In an informal talk at the December 2012 meeting of the Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group, Dr. Donna Barras shared her life's lessons with us.

She was raised in a town of 10,000 people in the upper peninsula of Michigan - Sault [Soo] Saint Marie. This area is known for the Soo Locks that allow boat traffic between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. Watching the huge vessels pass through the Soo locks is a unique experience that cannot be seen anywhere else in the United States. NOTE: To learn more about this interesting area, visit <http://www.exploringthenorth.com/soo/locks.html> Just north of there is the "sister city" Sault Saint Marie, Ontario, Canada.

In 1931, at the age of nine months, Dr. Barras contracted polio. Both of her legs were involved, but she now thinks probably more was affected. Only one other person on the opposite side of town developed polio that year.

She wore two braces until she was three years old. Eventually the left leg brace gave out. She didn't need it, so she walked with a nice big limp, wearing high-top shoes. She did everything with the kids. If they went tobogganing, she went tobogganing. She couldn't skate on the ice, but she could sit and hold the Band-Aids. If they went bowling, she went too, and if she

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bowled 50 that was big. She was involved in everything. Nobody ever had to look after her.

Her mother and father raised her to be independent. She attended the local Catholic schools. It was then that she decided she wanted to become a doctor. At that time there weren't many women doctors, but she didn't know that, and she didn't care. Following high school graduation, someone from the Michigan Department of Rehabilitation told her that she could become a lab technician. But she told them No, she was not going to be a lab technician, she was going to become a doctor, "and that's that!"

She spent the following two years at Michigan Tech in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan and then transferred to Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for her third year of pre-med studies. Next she applied to Marquette University Medical School, was interviewed by the dean, and accepted. She loved every minute of those four years of medical school.

Following graduation from medical school, Dr. Walter Blount, a famous orthopedic surgeon, suggested that her internship should be done in a large hospital to see if she could handle it. She selected Los Angeles County General Hospital and was accepted as an intern for 1955 - 1957.

During that period of time an intern worked all the time; drew blood from patients, did your own lab work, did everything... up night and day. As an intern, Dr. Barras took care of many polio patients, including some on ventilators. It was a terrific experience for her. At that time she met Dr. Vernon Nickel and later Dr. Jacquelin Perry, both of whom had joined the orthopedic staff at Los Angeles County's Rancho Los Amigos Hospital, aka "Rancho."

Later Dr. Barras was invited to join the Rancho staff and was hired. But when she went to have the required physical for employment, she was told she would not be able to be hired, because she had a brace. "WHAT??" she exclaimed! Immediately she went to the medical director, Dr. John Affeldt, and said, "You want me, I don't want you. You better do something about that." He replied, "There's no problem. The only thing you cannot do is drive a County ambulance."

At Rancho Dr. Barras worked closely with the polio children to be sure they kept up with their studies. The Rancho School was established on the grounds for in-patients and staffed with teachers and a principal from the local Downey Unified School District. After the children were discharged, the Rancho staff worked with neighborhood schools in other school districts to convince them to accept handicapped children in their regular classrooms.

In 1989 Dr. Barras retired from what she was doing on the hospital wards and is now at

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Rancho's Center for Applied Rehabilitation Technology (CART). This program of advanced assistive technology was one of the first in the country.

“As we get older, I think polio survivors need to learn to be a little more careful with their bodies and not try to keep on doing the impossible.” That means not walking without a crutch or a cane or something because, sooner or later, it will catch up with you and bite you in the butt. You just need to be able to look at the things you can do and perhaps do them differently.

### **Oops!**

Dr. Barras walked until five years ago, but knew she would have to stop at some time. While she was vacationing in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, she went into her bathroom and took off her leg brace, as she usually did. As she started to walk a few steps, her crutch slipped on the floor, she heard this crunch sound, and fell on the floor. She knew her left leg had broken at the knee and she was in trouble. She also knew she wasn't going to see anyone about it there. She told a friend who was with her, “Go downstairs to the bar where the men are drinking, and get the biggest man you can see and bring him to the room to lift me up onto the bed.” Her friend returned with a husky man, and he gently lifted her onto the bed. He was very kind and treated her as if she were his grandmother.

She spent two weeks in her hotel room, watching the swelling on her leg go down and hoping her brace would fit her leg. And it finally did. On a Saturday she flew back to Los Angeles, called Dr. Eberly on Monday, and had surgery the next day. But that meant the end of her walking.

### **Life Goes On**

Regarding bracing, her two legs were braced until age 3, but after the left brace broke she was able to get along without it. So, for many years, she only wore a right long-leg brace and used crutches. Following surgery for her broken left leg, Dr. Perry thought that leg should have a “half-brace” (AFO: ankle-foot-orthosis) so it wouldn't give out. “You just do what you have to do,” Dr. Barras added. “Life never stops.”

Dr. Barras is still here at Rancho because she loves the place, she loves the people, and she loves the things that they do. She would love to be able to use the new robotics being developed at Rancho, but cannot because her shoulders are worn out from all that crutch walking. Shoulder surgery is not practical in her case.

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She tries to conserve her shoulders and do as much as she can to protect them. “You really have to watch what you do. And don’t fall. I hope you don’t have scatter rugs around your house. Those things can be lethal.”

Dr. Barras also hopes you don’t have slippery floors. She finds carpeting is best for her; she even has it in her bathroom, but not in her kitchen. “You really need to be looking where you're going,” she said. When she was walking, she was always looking at the floors, looking for cracks or other things that could throw you off balance.

She added, “People with post-polio are probably one of the most strong-headed groups of people in the world. They know better than anybody else and they won’t listen to anybody else. As we get older, we find that yes, there are ways in which we can be happy in life. Be grateful for what you can do and don’t overexert yourself.”

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## **Some thoughts on Positive Attitude**

Oh, my friend, it’s not what they take away from you that counts, it’s what you do with what you have left. ~Hubert Humphrey

Attitudes are contagious. Are yours worth catching?

~Dennis and Wendy Mannering

Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference. ~Winston Churchill

In Dr. Barras' story she mentions Dr. John Affeldt. Your editorial team thought that our readers would enjoy reading more about this remarkable physician.

John E. Affeldt, MD came to Rancho Los Amigos Hospital, in Los Angeles County, in 1951. He was Medical director at Rancho from 1957 to 1964, Dr. Affeldt was in charge of the polio respiratory center there and organized the first extensive home care system for significantly disabled polio survivors, who were up to that time "warehoused" in hospitals.

He was sent by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (NFIP), more commonly known as the March of Dimes, to evaluate the staffing, space, and equipment needs of Rancho. The NFIP was developing thirteen regional respiratory centers across the United States. At that time the hospital census at Rancho averaged eighty-five polio cases, with the majority having significant respiratory impairment. Most were in iron lungs, and about half of these patients also had tracheostomies.

In 1953, under Dr. Affeldt's direction, Rancho began its Home Care Department, an innovative and interdepartmental undertaking. The program included mechanics and electricians who were on call and could be dispatched to patient's homes 24 hours a day. The County also supplied back-up electric generators for those who were still ventilator dependent.

The cost of caring for a ventilator-assisted polio survivor at home was one third to one half the cost of hospitalization. Rancho's Home Care department - the most extensive ever attempted - became a model of how to return significantly disabled patients to the community and into society.

Also, during Affeldt's tenure, Clarence Dail, MD, noticed a paralyzed polio patient using a substitute method of breathing. This method of breathing was eventually taught to others and was called glossopharyngeal, or "frog" breathing.

Dr. Affeldt later became director of Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, the president of the American Hospital Association, and president of the Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Hospitals.

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An interesting note: Dr. John Affeldt, Dr. Jacquelin Perry, and Dr. Vernon Nickel were all born in 1918. These three physicians were all working at Rancho Los Amigos at the same time. These three also had a significant impact on the science of polio rehabilitation worldwide.



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The Summer Meeting Schedule for the Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group includes:

Saturday, June 22, 2013 - Annual Picnic - see information and map on page 7

Saturday, July 27, 2013 - Open / Sharing

Saturday, August 24, 2013 - Gadgets and Tips

Saturday, September 28, 2013 - Academy Medical Equipment, Donna Miyahara, OTR/L, BS, ATP

## Meeting Schedule for the Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County

Saturday, July 13, 2013, 2 to 4p.m. - **Indoor Picnic**

Saturday, Sept. 14, 2013, 2 to 4p.m. - **HICAP**

Saturday, Nov. 9, 2 to 4p.m. - **Dr. Donna Barras**

*This is a joint meeting with the Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group*

*For additional information, please call:*

Marte Fuller at 562-697-0507 or Marilyn Andrews at 714-839-3121

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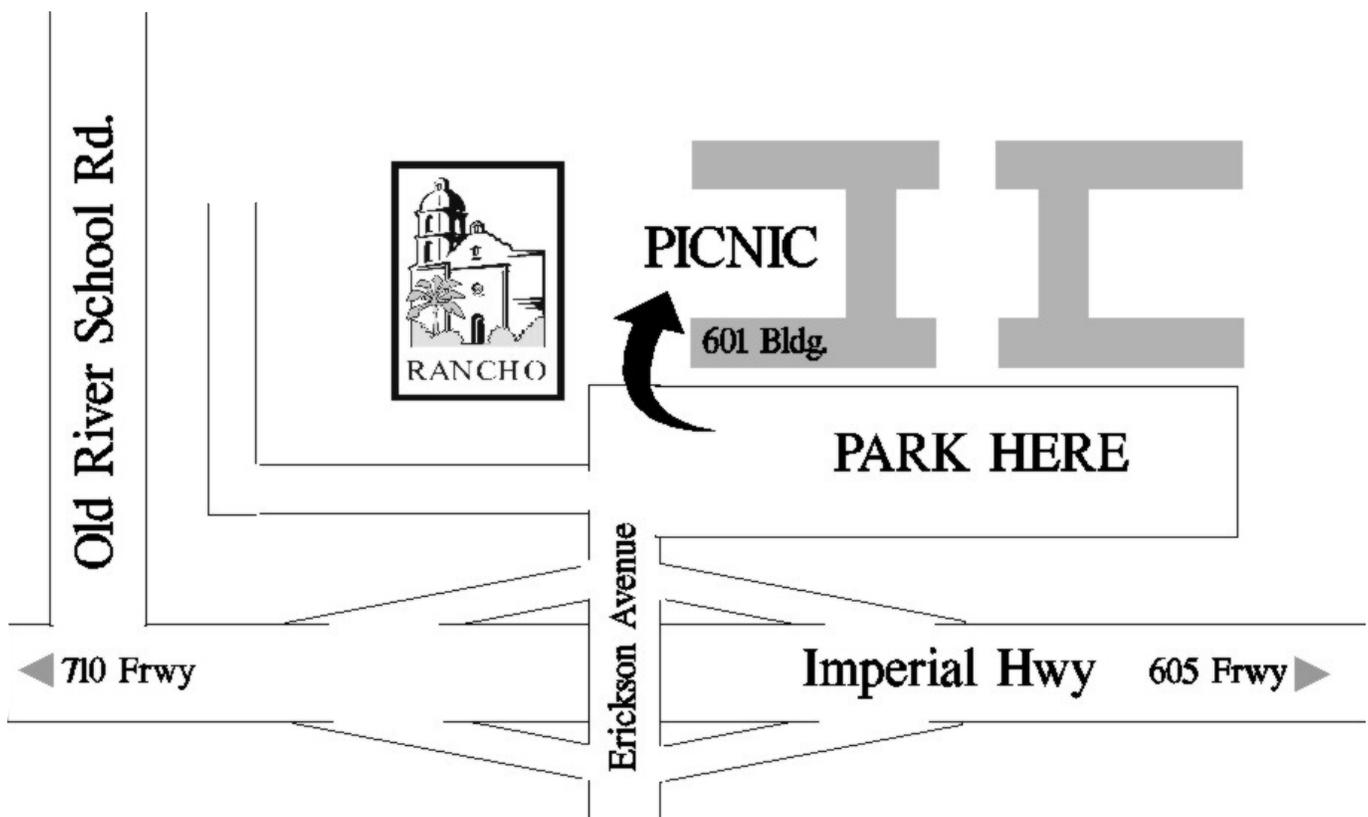
## Meeting Schedule for the Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group

Saturday, June 22, 2013, 2 to 4p.m. - **Annual Picnic**

Enter Rancho Los Amigos from Imperial Hwy. Park in front of the 601 Building.

*Please see map below.*

This is normally a restricted parking location, but we have permission to park here for our annual picnic. Our annual picnic is always enjoyable. We share good food, good company, and interesting activities. Please join us.



Rancho Los Amigos PPSG  
12720 La Reina Avenue  
Downey, California 90242  
USA

## **FREE MATTER FOR THE BLIND OR DISABLED**

*The Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group and the Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County share a mailing list and publish newsletters on alternate months. All of our meetings are open to polio survivors, family, and friends.*

*Our meetings are relaxed, informal, and provide a supportive atmosphere for the exchange of ideas and concerns.*

Visit your local support group.

You will be glad you did.