Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group

Newsletter - October 2013

In our August 2013 newsletter we asked readers to submit their early recollections of polio. We are very grateful for the personal stories that have been submitted. The following story is the first of those submitted. This personal recollection will be printed in two parts.

Living with Polio - Part One

By Astrid Gallagher

At this late date it is impossible to separate the polio experience from the rest of my life. I suspect that the disease hasn't influenced who I am, my personality, how I think, feel and react. It changed who I married, where I lived, my work, and what physical activities I can do. And it taught me at an early age to cope with adversity and not take too much for granted.

In my mind the polio dates to five months before I got sick. In May, 1955, I was at the end of my junior year at Scripps College, Claremont, California. I finally got the hang of taking notes, studying, writing essays, taking exams, etc., and was getting good grades.

I had entered college in February 1953, and in order to catch up with the class of '56 I took 18 credits both semesters 54-55. I was accepted as a member of Orchesis, a national college dance organization. This particular day I practiced newly learned high leaps across a lawn at Scripps. I was on top of the world. As I was leaping I had a sudden and overwhelming sense of foreboding. To this day I remember thinking "Everything is going so well for me, something bad is going to happen."

The summer started out wonderfully. I took the Greyhound bus from California to New York, with a stop in Michigan to see my boyfriend of three years. In Pennsylvania I was a bridesmaid

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

at the wedding of a college classmate. In New York I stayed with friends of my parents. They took me to see “Inherit the Wind” with Clarence Darrow, “The Bad Seed,” and “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.” They sent me to Elizabeth Arden for a hairdo, makeup, and nails. I visited the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum. I was invited to Club 21 and to other sophisticated restaurants.

At the end of June, I flew home to Bogota, Colombia. This was my first visit home since I’d left in 1953. I was happy to be there. I don’t remember much about the next two months. I was very tired and slept a lot, I know. By September I looked forward to my senior year. I came down with flu-like symptoms on September 9, 1955. A doctor came and gave me some medication for flu and then disappeared. I got much worse. My legs wouldn’t hold me when I went to the bathroom, I couldn’t stand, then sit, and finally the breathing got harder. For three days I didn’t sleep, as I stopped breathing every time I’d fall asleep. My father gave me his version of CPR all night and my mother all day. My sister’s fiancé knew a doctor who’d practiced in the U.S. This doctor diagnosed my illness as polio and told my parents I needed immediate help or I’d die. At that time there were no facilities anywhere in Colombia for the treatment of polio.

My sister went to the American Embassy as I had a U.S. Immigration visa. It just happened that a U.S. Navy plane had arrived in Bogota the day before. They assembled the crew and tried to phone Gorgas Hospital in the Panama Canal Zone that I was coming. However, all the phone lines out of Bogota were down. An American at the Embassy who was a ham radio operator contacted an operator in Ecuador (the son of the President of Ecuador), who called Gorgas Hospital.

My mother (who wouldn’t be back home in Colombia for two years) and I, were airlifted to the Canal Zone. We arrived after dark. The first doctor to see me asked, “How far can you count?” The answer was 6, before I took another pant. There is nothing more wonderful than an iron lung when you need it.

My mother stayed at the Canal Zone hotel, until a few days later, when Dr. and Mrs. Icke invited her to live with them as long as she needed it. Another doctor made arrangements for my treatment to be paid for by the New York chapter of the March of Dimes. Both these kindnesses were a great relief to my parents who had no medical insurance and not a great amount of funds either.

Gorgas Hospital is a military facility named after Dr. William Gorgas who discovered the cause of the yellow fever that decimated the crews building the canal. At this time it was mostly empty. I was alone in a ward meant for 40 patients. I had 3 nurses around the clock. One was Australian, who with her husband were sailing around the world. Whenever they needed

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

money, they'd stop somewhere and work. Another was a mother of small children. She'd been in a terrible accident, had gone through the windshield, her throat was full of scars. The third, Orma Ohlhausen, was the wife of an officer. She was kind, funny, not fussy and I loved her dearly.

I could lift my right forearm, and wiggle my right hand. The rest of the muscles were totally gone. Two days after I arrived, my lungs filled up with fluid and I was choking and drowning. I couldn't yell, so I started banging on the side of the iron lung with my right hand. A nurse came running and saw me turning blue. A crew of doctors arrived and tried poking a tube down my nose. At this point I passed out. When I finally came to, I'd gotten an emergency tracheostomy, my lungs were suctioned, and I was breathing again. I was mortified that I'd wet the bed. I still had a high fever and pain everywhere. After my fever broke the treatment was hot wet blankets. They eased the pain, but wet wool stinks.

Gorgas had the equipment, but no real physical therapy program for polio. After I was no longer in the acute stage, Dr. Woods (he was young and cute) opened the iron lung one day and said, "Now breathe." I protested as best I could (with a trach you need to cover the tube in order to speak.) He left it open one whole minute of agony. Thereafter, Dr. Woods came every day and opened the iron lung longer and longer. After a month or so I was moved to a rocking bed in the daytime, and Dr. Woods extended the time until I was breathing on my own a good part of the day. These hours weren't easy and my mother would sit next to me and read. I don't remember what she read, but I remember yelling at her when she needed the bathroom or some water. I think I was pretty much of a brat to her. Later, when I could hold a book myself, she was relieved of this task and grateful that I could read on my own.

I was weaned from the iron lung to the rocking bed fulltime. A physical therapist appeared. He was a short bulldog of a man, but lively and funny. He looked like an Italian tenor (which he was). He came one day with his gorgeous wife who was almost a foot taller and they sang Italian opera for me.

Every day he sat me up on the edge of the bed. After you've been lying in bed for a couple months or more, it's a weird feeling to sit up. You get kind of buzzy in the head and the legs tingle. He also held me less and less every day until I could hold my body in a sitting position. He had full leg braces made for me, and stood me up between parallel bars. This was very hard work. The braces were heavy, and I hadn't regained sufficient arm strength to pull myself along. In the end I did get from one end of the bars to the other, turn, and go back. One of the doctors in the hospital told my mother I'd never walk again.

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

Occasionally my mother wheeled the rocking bed out on a balcony and I could catch a bit of wind while I read. One day she was told I couldn't be there anymore. I wore shorts and a shirt when I was out there. I weighed 95 lbs. and the shorts' legs were very wide. So a bunch of servicemen from a ward across from mine were crowding their windows to stare up my crotch. My mother thought this was hilarious, so instead of shorts, she put a sheet over my legs.

My boyfriend visited me on his way home to Colombia after his graduation from the University of Michigan. He said his dad had told him to burn all my letters. He was a smoker, and I bummed a cigarette from him. I exhaled smoke through the trach tube. I thought that was so cool, practicing smoke rings out my throat.

After six months, I was breathing on my own both day and night. The decision was made to transfer me to a rehab stateside. I was given the choice of Warm Springs, Georgia or Rancho Los Amigos Hospital, in Downey, California. I chose Rancho. I was flown by U.S. Army Medical plane (beds only) to Brooks Army Medical Center near San Antonio, Texas to wait for a plane to California. I was put in a huge ward filled with guys. I was of course an object of curiosity and they questioned why I was there and what was wrong with me. Since I still had the trach tube, answering wasn't easy, and I felt awkward.

At Long Beach Airport an ambulance whisked me away to Rancho. And that was the last time that I lay on a gurney. The very next day, a team of doctors, led by Dr. Jacquelin Perry, along with physical and occupational therapists, and orthotists did a complete evaluation. I was put on a daily program of physical therapy that started at 8 a.m. and ended at 4 p.m. I got around in a wheelchair, and wheeled myself from swimming, to PT, to OT, and so on. This was a busy place. And there were many others in my age group to talk to. Every afternoon, after our workouts we'd gather in the solarium to talk or play games. Rancho was a great place, a happy place. We were too busy to ponder our futures.

I improved dramatically. I regained muscle power in my back, shoulders, arms, hands, and feet. Without quads I learned to walk lock-kneed and use gravity to throw my legs forward. I had a sense of balance that allowed me to move despite lacking some crucial muscles.

Eventually l walked with only one forearm crutch. Steps, curbs, getting up from the floor, a toilet or from chairs would always be a problem. I had multiple muscle transfer surgeries on my hands to correct weaknesses and improve the ability to grasp objects. Again, the March of Dimes paid all the hospitalization costs. The monthly bill was about $1000, a huge amount. When I was discharged in September 1956 one of the doctors told my mother that polio would take fifteen years off my life.

To be continued ...

Editor's Note: We appreciate the polio stories that our readers have submitted. The one on the preceding pages, from Astrid Gallagher, will be printed in two parts. You might want to save this issue to go with part two. We also have an excellent story submitted by Ben Patrick that will be printed soon.

These recollections of our first days with polio are valuable. Many of us can relate to some parts, and others will get insights into how polio can affect each of us differently. We invite, and encourage, more of our readers to share their experiences. Don't worry about how it looks. Just get your memories written and submitted. Then our editorial staff will "polish" it for your approval before printing.

Our thanks to the newsletter readers who have already agreed to receive our newsletter electronically, through their e-mail. This helps save on printing costs, plus it saves our muscle power required for folding, labeling, and mailing.

When you sign up for the e-mail version of these newsletters, you can open the Newsletter attachment and there it is…ready to read or print out. Did you know that the newsletters can also be read and printed at our website?

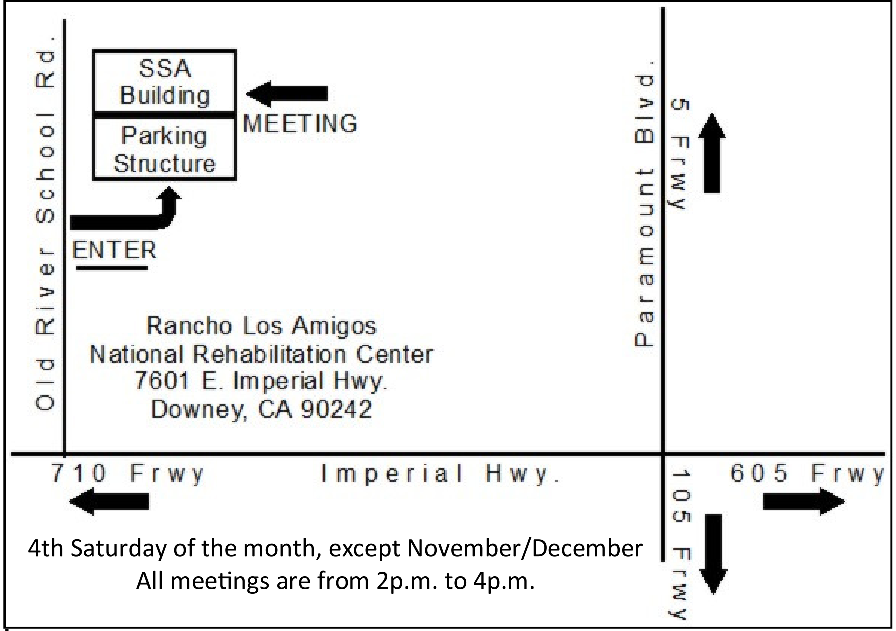
Go to: www.RanchoPPSG.com and click on Newsletters.

In September, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) reported 32 new poliovirus cases in Somalia, bringing the total case count in this outbreak to 160. In addition, cases have been reported in Kenya and Ethiopia. The polio outbreak in Somalia began with its first case in April. These are the first wild poliovirus cases reported in Somalia since 2007.

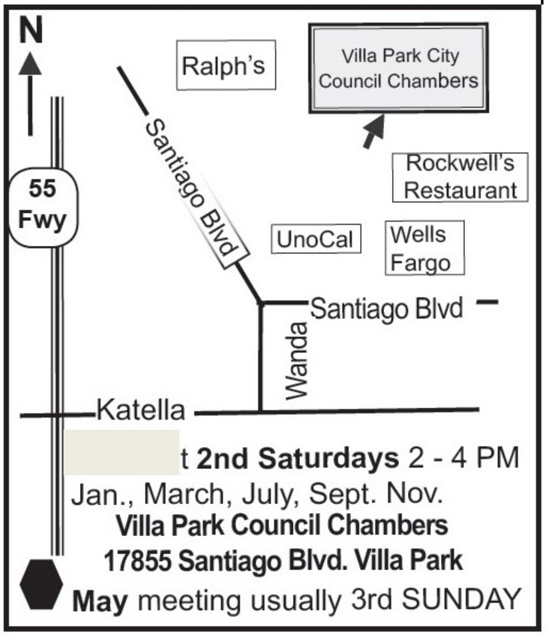
After an assessment they concluded that the outbreak in both Somalia and Kenya will extend beyond six months, due to large numbers of under vaccinated children in Somalia and the inconsistent campaign quality in Kenya.

In addition to the Horn of Africa outbreak, two of the three polio endemic countries reported new polio cases. Both Pakistan and Nigeria reported two cases. Afghanistan continues to report new polio cases, and these are probably underreported because of the opposition to vaccination by the Taliban.

Polio is still a Danger! One business person or one missionary could return and spread the disease to their family and neighbors. Make sure every child is vaccinated!



4th Saturday of the month, except November/December
All meetings are from 2p.m. to 4p.m.



t **2nd Saturdays** 2 - 4 PM
Jan., March, July, Sept. Nov.
Villa Park Council Chambers
17855 Santiago Blvd. Villa Park
May meeting usually 3rd SUNDAY

We periodical include maps to the support group meetings.
The map above on the left is for the Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group.
The map above on the right is for the Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County.

For additional information about the Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group or our meeting topics and schedule, please contact:

Diane at 562-861-8128 or Richard at 562-862-4508
or e-mail us at: RanchoPPSG@hotmail.com

For additional information about the Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County, or their meeting topics and schedule, please call:

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

All post-polio support group meetings are open to family and friends, and we encourage their attendance. Post-polio affects you, of course, but it can also affect those around you. Please invite them to our meetings.

Life is like a mountain railway, with many twists and turns. But you always reach your destination and you'll see some beautiful scenery along the way. **Enjoy the Ride!**

During and polio epidemics of the 1940s and early 1950s, Rancho Los Amigos Hospital was the largest respiratory polio center in the United States and continues today to see many polio survivors in its out-patient clinics. In the early1980s, Rancho physicians Jacquelin Perry, MD and D. Armin Fischer, MD were among the first to recognize the late effects of polio and publish informative articles in prominent medical journals. Soon after this, Dr. Perry asked permission of the Polio Survivors Association to use its mailing list to contact individuals who might be interested in forming a local support group.

The Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group was formed in 1987 and received support from Dr. Perry in establishing a meeting space and distributing our newsletter. The support group continues to meet at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center, currently in the newer Support Services Annex (SSA) Building, Conference Room 1150. Everyone is always welcome to attend our friendly meetings.

Below are some helpful links:

Polio Survivors Association
12720 La Reina Avenue
Downey, California 90242
(562) 862-4508 voice and fax
Web site: www.polioassociation.org

- ⇒ Information on polio and the late effects of polio. An excellent resource for students, with descriptive text and numerous photographs.

Post-Polio Health International
4207 Lindell Blvd., #110
St. Louis, Missouri 63108
(314) 534-0475
Web site: www.post-polio.org

- ⇒ Information on polio and the late effects of polio. Resource list of physicians, other healthcare professionals, and polio support groups

Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County

We work with the Post-Polio Support Group of Orange County on many projects, and some polio survivors attend both groups' meetings. This group meets the second Saturday of every other month, January, March, May, July, September, and November, in Villa Park, California. Web site: www.ppsupportoc.org

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.