



ROTARY INTERNATIONAL

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A MEMOIR

I remember the cool damp day half a century ago when I was playing with my brother and his neighborhood friends in the back yard. We were digging a tunnel. Suddenly, I could not go on, turn around, or move. Having lost the use of one arm and one leg, all I could do was cry. The boys found our household handyman to come and carry me to the house. During this era, there was an immediate assumption I must be stricken with polio.

My father had just found a new family doctor who was a polio survivor himself. He kept saying that he did not think it was polio. Following weeks of tests, when nurses came to the house to take samples of my blood and rush it to the clinic for examination, specialists came to the conclusion that it was an acute form of rheumatic fever. I remained bed-ridden for nine months. It took that long to regain use on my limbs. However, I experienced much of what polio victims experienced. I was isolated in my room. I saw no children or even my brother the rest of that year. I missed pre-school.

My grandparents visited and one grandmother made it a point to spend one afternoon per week with me to tell me the latest Peter Rabbit stories. That was a special time.

After recovery and beginning the first grade, I realized that I was treated differently. I was never allowed to attend recess, play on a team, or attend gym. It was traumatic and I survived.

Because of this experience, I have a strong empathy for polio survivors. Years later while attending my first Rotary International Convention in Glasgow, Scotland as an incoming Club President, I got to witness Rotary bestow a special award to polio survivor and my teen age idol—Dr. Tenley Albright. As Dr. Albright walked unassisted across the stage, I cheered and cried. She had become an Olympic figure skating champion and a noted pediatrician in Boston.

There are many many polio stories out there. Share them with me as Rotarians meet the Gates Foundation Challenge. Send me your stories at bsh6890@aol.com. Every Rotarian has a story. Let me share your stories with others. And, let us meet the Gates Challenge to wipe polio out of the remaining four infected countries. Let it never be a threat to people again. Rotarians, we can only do this together.

— PDG Barbara Shayeb-Helou



Polio Awareness Week
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