



Daniel Matakas

It was a hot August day in 1939 that I had the misfortune of being infected by the polio virus. According to what my mother told me, she called me in the house to take a nap before supper. I was hot and sweaty for playing with my neighborhood friend. I was laying on my roll-a-way bed in the corner of the living room (Can you tell we were poor?) when she called me to get up and eat. I told her I couldn't. I guess she thought I was being a brat and said if I didn't get up I would go to bed without supper.

During the night I was crying and fussing so she took my temperature and I had a fever. I still had a fever in the morning so she called the doctor. The doctor sent me to Sigma Gamma Hospital (Now St. John's North) and after a spinal tap, it was determined I had polio. None of the kids I was playing with or my two sisters were infected. The things I can recall from my time at Sigma Gamma were the hot wool towels, the big board I laid on in the warm pool, the long time between visits, and the planting of a corn seed in the partial egg shell.

The doctors told my mother I would never walk again and she said "Oh yes he will" and I did. I have to give my grandmother a lot of credit for recovering as well as I did. I remember her putting me in the hot tub, as hot as I could stand it and massaging my leg. Then she would put Ben-Gay or Sloans Linament on it and wrap in towels. I'm sure this helped improve the circulation.

I remember when my grandmother visited me I would ask her for her wide black shiny belt, because I liked to roll it up as tight as I could get it. One of the unhappy memories was when I soiled my diaper once too often, the nurse or volunteer said if I did that again she would put it in my face. Well, I did and she did, ugh!!

My care must have been good, because I started kindergarten at Oakman School for Crippled Children (in Detroit) right on time at five years old. I had a long leg brace, a corset that attached to my brace with 2 straps and I used crutches.

I attended Oakman school from kindergarten through the ninth grade and graduated in January 1952. This was a great school and the teachers were even greater! The patience, kindness, and understanding they must have been saints. The school has a mixture of every problem a child could have, polio, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, cardiac, you name it! We even had a couple of midgets.

On Mondays we had a dentist and on Wednesday and Friday, we had a doctor and 2 nurses who would give us treatments and check ups. The school also had buses with an attendant (Otto) who would carry or help us on and off the bust right in front of our home.

This school also had shop, band, home cooking, jewelry making, art room, library, printing, and a conservatory. I had good marks so my art teacher, (Mrs. Spenser) recommended that I go to Cass Tech and major in art, so I did. Cass had 6 floors, but it also had elevators, Thank God.

When I started Cass I had a problem. The books I had to take back and forth to do homework were too big and heavy and I had to take two buses each way. I made the decision to try going without my crutches. I had to leave much earlier, but I got used to it. It was a lot easier to get on and off the buses and handle the books at the same time. Sometimes ya gotta do what ya gotta do!

Because I graduated on the honor roll, I received three jobs, (something today's graduates would die for!) I served an apprenticeship at an art studio where the executives from GM would come for Tuesday morning meetings. One of my jobs was to serve them donuts and coffee. After two weeks of struggling with a big awkward box and spilling coffee as I limped, I got smart and designed a box with the handle in the middle that I could carry with one hand. After one and a half years I got hired at Ford Engineering, became a product design engineer and retired after 42 years.

Some of my (special) experiences related to having polio:

- Falling and doing the splits caused me to scream in pain.
- When I was about 12 or 13, I threw a fit about wearing my corset. Mostly because I got teased about wearing a girdle and it was also very hot and uncomfortable. I tried to throw it to the ground many times to break it, but it just kept bouncing around, which made me madder yet!
- I was consistently breaking my brace and crutches which must have cost the March of Dimes a lot. When I was about 11, my mother showed me a stack of bills about 1 ½ inches high and told me the March of Dimes had paid about \$5,000.00 in bills for me. My mother went door to door with a canister collecting dimes.
- When my mother took me downtown shopping I would race through the crowd ahead of her on my crutches, stop real quick, turn around and get a kick out of the look on people's faces.
- When I fell, I learned to get up real quick because if I didn't, two or three people would come running to help me get up (good intentions). They would pull me in two or three different directions and made things worse.

If you are getting bored with all, go to the last two paragraphs. (Hope you are not).

I had the most exhilarating experience when a good friend of mine (Bill Davis) taught me how to ride a bike! My dad bought two old bikes from the police auction for \$15.00 and asked me to see if I could make one good bike. It took a lot of work, but in a week I had a fine bike! After much patience and several falls, my friend let me go and I was riding a bike! I will never forget how great the feeling of freedom and independence felt. The best I could do before was run on my crutches and now I could zip around the block in no time, and not even feel tired. I loved it! To go extra fast, I would push my right knee down with my hand to make up for the weakness. Because of my upper body strength, I had fun beating the 15 and 16 year olds at wrestling and hand squeezing when I was only 13 or 14. Another thing that was fun at the playground is that I would impress the other kids by going hand over hand up the poles that held the swings. I could go completely up and across and back without touching the ground.

The worst thing that ever happened to me as result of having polio was on Halloween 1944. I was 7 years old and it was my first time to dress up and go begging. I went with my older sister and some neighborhood friends and was all excited about collecting all those goodies! My excitement quickly changed to disappointment as I discovered I only had a few candies and pennies in the corner of my bag! What had happened was the bag was rubbing against my crutches as I ran from house to house and put a big hole in my bag and my goodies kept falling out!

I remember the show between movies the March of Dimes showed a movie of a little girl walking with two braces and crutches and playing "You'll Never Walk Alone". A lot of people donated and cried, including me.

Some of the negative experiences I had are as follows:

One time, I was on the beach and a mother came by with her little boy and he said, "look at the man with the skinny leg". That bothered me for about a month. I got over that in a hurry because I loved swimming and the beach.

One time, I pushed a schoolmate who would run up to me, slap me, and run back. I happened to catch him and pushed him backwards into a big door with a large plate glass window that came crashing down around him. I thought I killed him. He turned out to be okay. He didn't bother me after that! A kid in the neighborhood would take my crutches whenever he had a chance. One time he only got one, so as he was running away, I threw the other one like a spear and hit him right in the middle of his back. When he let out a yell and fell down, I thought I killed him too. He was okay because it was winter and he had a heavy coat on.

I lifted barbells when I became a teenager and would put on a little show in the backyard. I would put the weights on real loose so they made a lot of noise. The neighborhood kids got a kick out of that. I played baseball and could bat pretty well. I had someone run for me. I could pitch but if another kid wanted to pitch I'd play the outfield. I caught a lot of fly balls (with my crutches) that a lot of kids thought I couldn't get.

I went to the Detroit Orthopedic Clinic on Woodward Ave. in Detroit every Wednesday for a check up. I would walk back and forth in front of a big mirror and my Dr. (Walsh) would adjust my brace and let my mother and I know how I was doing. I had a knee operation on my good leg when I was about 13 or 14. Dr. Walsh put staples across the growth line above and below my knee so my leg only grew at my hip and my ankle. This helped even up my legs and was very successful because now I only have a 1/4 inch lift on my brace shoe.

I'm 73 years old now and I spend most of my time working hard at having fun. I swim, bowl and ride my bike. I have noticed I'm getting a little weaker and having a harder time walking, probably PPS coming on! My friends in the network are encouraging me to get a scooter. That probably will happen in the near future. At the present time if I have to walk any distance or on uneven ground I go back to my trusty old crutches. I've been a member of the MPN for 9 years. I became friends with some great people and have enjoyed it very much.

End of Story, Bye!