



# Phyllis M. Peters

At the age of 13, I was stricken with polio from the neck down in the fall of September, 1940. I had complained of headache and chills for several days, the family physician examined me and told my grandmother I was suffering from growing pains. I continued to be active, and baby-sat for a family in our small village. In a short time my headache worsened, my back stiffened, and I was unable to sit due to a rigid back. I had intense pain in my back and extremities, along with a sore throat. I was taken by car, my stiff body crossways in the front seat, to the Three Rivers Hospital emergency room, twelve miles from my home. My fever stayed right at the temperature of 101 degrees. The attending physician Dr. O'Dell aware of cases of polio in the country took precautions and ordered a spinal performed. The nurses had to force my back curved for the needle to be injected, it was very painful. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead and one kind R.N. touched my forehead with a cloth to absorb the moisture. I was returned home and ordered to rest in bed. After the test results revealed acute polio plans were hastened to have me admitted to the University of Michigan Hospital at Ann Arbor Michigan.

The trip to Ann Arbor was made by the local hearse which at the time also served as an ambulance. I was terrified. The driver was very dignified and tried to keep my spirits up. A family member was allowed to sit with me in the back because I was so afraid. I wondered if I would ever see my home again and tears welled in my eyes.

Once we reached the huge hospital it took a long time to get papers filed to have me admitted to the facility. I was placed in isolation, in a room with a window and a door, an iron lung was located across the room. My entire body, arms, legs, and head pained, I could not rest. Once the isolation ended I was moved to the children's ward in the main hospital. My bed was crowded into the room, a tot in playpen was nearby and cried a lot. There were no patients my age and my unhappiness led the staff to move me to an adult 14-bed ward. The illness and separation from my family caused me to cry often.

Two frames constructed of galvanized pipe were covered with a heavy, off-white canvas to support my body. I was on my stomach for 12 hours, then the second frame was strapped to me on the opposite side, I was sandwiched between the two and turned from back to stomach. Each leg had a splint which was wrapped securely with an elastic bandage. My arms were affected but it was decided not to brace them. I feared having my arms strapped too, and I objected to the idea. A book holder was fashioned to enable me to read without using my arms, my education continued. My teacher was a kind lady and smiled often to inspire me to smile too.

The days were filled with loneliness until I adjusted to the realization my life was never going to be the same. Acceptance was not easy for an active sports minded teenager who thrived on competition. My family could only afford the 70-mile trip to visit me every two or three weeks. The First Presbyterian Church at White Pigeon where I had attended since a tot appointed a familiar elderly lady to be their representative to be a link between me and the church members. This lady provided comfort, inspiration, prayer and love to my wounded spirit. An angel, the widowed lady boarded a bus to make the trips, her arms carried valued reading material, fruit, and small gifts for my enjoyment. That bridge to my hometown was an important factor in my wanting to survive the ordeal.

My young perception of the illness was destructive to my personality and I felt abandoned. I could not understand the overall reason for taking me so far from home and family. It took time to realize the facilities in Michigan were limited to caring for polio patients. I met a girl from Cadillac, then I knew from our conversations her home was far more distant than mine. The staff organized party-type groupings to keep up our spirits.

Each Friday beds, wheelchairs, and those who could walk were taken to the seventh floor and crammed into a room. It was a fun time with much laughter, they showed movies, refreshments were served and we visited and met new friends. We were packed in that room like sardines, we didn't care, there was happiness as we socialized. The weekly party was anticipated by everyone and it was kind of the professionals to come up with the idea, it was needed to help the teens mend.

Fear was the greatest problem I faced in my recovery from the effects of polio. Perhaps it could be described as mental anguish, the uncertainty of what was ahead for me and my family. The biggest challenge is the acceptance of a physical impairment, it is not easy at first, but time does bring results. I hated the two, full leg braces, back brace and crutches I eventually embraced. When I went to a half brace on my right leg, it allowed me to bend my knee and not be troubled by locks to sit down, on that side. Four years after the initial attack of polio, surgery was performed to correct drop foot on my left side. The club foot that developed was corrected at the same time. That was a positive step directed toward easing pain as I walked. In addition it improved my appearance, the black, ankle strap attached to the brace was eliminated. There were setbacks, such as a broken hip, and fractured knee cap, but family and friends rallied around me and visited me in the hospital to cheer me up.

My life really changed in 1946, I met a very special man who overlooked my handicap and loved me in spite of my imperfections. During our courtship I had more corrective surgery, he never failed to visit me each evening. One evening a very bad snow storm closed roads and a missionary room mate said, "If Charles comes tonight, you had better hang on to him, he is a rare jewel." I can still see him as he appeared in the hall, he looked so handsome in his white scarf, tucked in his overcoat and a big smile on his face. In 1947, we were married, the 50 years that followed were sprinkled with mishaps, broken bones, surgeries, two children and a my best friend was never far from my side.

We were separated by Charles' death May 2, 1997. I feel blessed, my life has been happy, my writing career brings me joy. My story, "I'll Always Love You," about my loss is scheduled to be published in a book with winning entries titled, "Triumph Over Tragedy," by Wilkes Publishing. The University of Michigan asked permission in writing to use my submission, "Wellness For Women with Polio", for their program and book that is planned.