

OWEN ROBERT WEIR – LIVING WITH POLIO

February 5, 2013

My name is Owen Robert Weir. I was born in Truro, Nova Scotia on June 6, 1943. I was the 9th child of 10 siblings born to Reta Althea (Wilson) and Ralph Irving Weir.

In the summer of 1951, I contacted polio at the age of eight.

Thinking back I recall the day I got sick... My brother and I were throwing firewood into the cellar window when my muscles became very achy and sore. I also developed a severe headache. I laid down hoping it would pass. It didn't... it got steadily worse.



Owen R. Weir- 10 years

My mother called our family doctor who came to the house. He felt I should be admitted to the Colchester Hospital in Truro. The next morning they did a spinal tap that indicated I had polio.

My room was quarantined and arrangements were made for me to be taken to the infectious disease hospital in Halifax, Nova Scotia. We could not afford an ambulance, so my brother-in-law, Bud Whidden, volunteered to drive my mother and me to Halifax in the cab of his half-ton truck. I can still recall the agony of that trip.

I was burning up with fever and shivering at the same time. When we arrived at the hospital I recall how frightened I was; as I did not know what was happening to me. I believe I stayed in that hospital overnight and then transferred to the Polio Clinic (Children's ward) the next morning. The next day, I recall orderly's pushing washing machines into the ward. The washing machines contained hot packs with water so hot that the staff had to handle these packs with tongs.

A hot pack consisted of pieces of wool blankets saturated with extremely hot water. The packs were wrapped around my legs and other parts of my body. Rubber sheeting was applied over that, to retain the heat. Over this a dry sheet was applied and pinned to hold everything in place. These would be applied, as I recall, every half hour during the mornings. After lunch was nap time, then in mid-afternoon a Physiotherapist would come in to stretch and exercise my arms, legs and back. At night I could hear the sound of the iron lungs, breathing for the patients who could not breathe on their own. The sound was like a large bellows 'swishing'. To me it sounded like 'giants breathing'. It was very frightening until I got accustomed to the sound.

It was a very lonely existence. In the beginning when my family came to see me, I could only look at them through a window. After the quarantine was lifted my mother would

come to visit every couple of weeks for the weekend. This was a very stressful time for her, as she had to leave the rest of her family to fend for their selves.

The nurses and staff wore face masks to protect them from the polio virus. My first stay in the hospital lasted for nine months. If it hadn't been for the dedicated nurses that looked after me, time would have been endless. They were there with me morning, noon and night. All I had to do was call 'nurse; and they were there. The nurses would do whatever necessary to make me feel comfortable. It was during this confinement that I began to recover. I recall on weekends a nurse would push me outside in the wheelchair for some fresh air and sunshine. I also had opportunity to go on the 'Walter Callou Bus'. The bus would take patients to the local hockey games and other special events, as well as to the Stadacona Naval Base for swimming and exercise.

After nine months my doctor, Dr. Tom Acker, discharged me from the hospital. I was so excited to be going home, but I found that I really missed all the nurses and new friends that had helped me cope with this stressful time in the hospital.



I was home for approximately six months when I received a letter stating that I needed to return to the Children's hospital for a check up. This went on every six months until the age of 13. Every time I received a letter to go back to the hospital it would fill me with '**Fear and Dread**' as I never knew how long I would have to stay. Sometimes it was 1-2 days, other times it would be weeks.

At the age of 13 my doctor and other specialists examined me and concluded that I should be able to walk with the aid of braces and crutches after surgery. The surgery consisted of an incision on both sides of my upper thighs where they stripped the tendons so I could stand straight. This was apparently necessary due to the long period of time where I was confined in a sitting position and the tendons had contracted. I was placed in traction on a bed that dropped off about 8 inches just below my pelvis. This was done in an attempt to stretch the tendons as they healed from surgery. **This was the most painful and uncomfortable time that I can recall.** After traction I had both legs in casts from my navel to ankles. The cast was on for 4-6 weeks. After the casts were removed I had physiotherapy twice a day in preparation for leg braces and crutches. This made me feel hopeful that one day I would be able to walk.

Once the braces and crutches were ready I had to begin to try to use them to walk. It was such an effort for me. It exhausted me even going a short distance. My teenage years were very stressful. I felt cheated because I was unable to do the fun things that other teenagers were doing. Polio took the use of my legs, but I made up for this by using my hands. I learned how to build things, sew and in my later teens learned electrical, carpentry and plumbing. I learned as much as I could about everything I could do with my hands. The one thing I recognized as my biggest handicap was my lack of education. Though I took some home schooling, I was unable to get beyond a grade 7 certificate.

This kept me from taking courses that would help to give me employment opportunities. This caused me to have an inferiority complex. I realized that I could not compete for 'normal' jobs with my peers, so I taught myself to sing and play guitar. This got me through my late teens as it built confidence. At age 19 I got my driver's license. I had saved some money from doing various odd jobs, which I used to buy a car; this gave me my independence.

Through church and other social gatherings I made many friends which gave me the opportunity to sing and play guitar for others. This helped build my self esteem, but I still felt inferior to others. My mother and father were true believers in me and my abilities and encouraged me constantly. When my father passed away in the Fall of 1964, this left a void in my life. My father's belief in me encouraged me to accomplish more in my own life.

The biggest change in my life happened when I met my wife, Carolyn. She gave me the encouragement I needed to set goals and to focus on a career. I enjoyed working with wood and fabric so I decided furniture upholstery would possibly be a rewarding career. Building this business with no training had its challenges. We struggled for many years, until finally we became successful, providing us with all the necessities of life, including two sons, Darren and Daniel. They brought so much joy into my life watching them grow and become successful in their own lives. Carolyn and I maintained the business from home as well as maintaining a beautiful home and large garden.



Carolyn & Owen 1993



Family means everything to me – as here, September 30, 1995 at Darren's wedding, left to right – Darren, myself, Carolyn, Daniel.

Being physically handicapped caused me to think about myself in relation to others. It was like an epiphany when I realized that every one of us has handicaps that we struggle to overcome. Some handicaps are more visible than others. It was around this time when I felt the braces and crutches were slowing me down. This is when I started using a wheelchair. This gave me more freedom, but I still felt people looked at me as unapproachable. To overcome this I realized I had to put their minds at ease. When I finally recognized who I was, I was not going to let polio stop me from all the things that made me feel confident. I began encouraging others through public speaking, singing with various bands, going in local talent shows, socializing and dancing in my wheelchair.

Even though polio changed my life *dramatically*, looking back there is very little I would change.

“My advice to anyone regardless of the circumstances ==set goals and strive to reach them.”