

Small Steps and the Next Generation

By Henry Holland

During the recent holiday period, I received an E-mail letter from Beth Wilson, a member of my Sunday School Class. Mrs. Wilson is a veteran teacher at Ridge Elementary School in Henrico County and is currently a fifth grade teacher. She wrote to tell me that her class last year had selected the book *Small Steps* by Peg Kehret as the best book that they had read during the year. The class sent letters to Peg Kehret and told her how much they liked the book and Mrs. Kehret had responded. Peg Kehret is a successful children's author. Over thirty of her books have been published. *Small Steps* was published in 1996 and is about "the year I got polio." The book is for readers ages nine to twelve.

Twelve-year-old Peg Kehret contracted spinal-bulbar polio in Austin, Minnesota in September 1949 soon after school had started that year. She was the only person in her small town to get paralytic polio. She was hospitalized during the acute phase of her polio illness at the University of Minnesota Hospital in Minneapolis, and she was transferred to the Sheltering Arms Hospital, also in Minneapolis, in October for extensive physical therapy and rehabilitation. She was ultimately discharged in February 1950. At the time of her discharge, she was able to walk with "sticks" (Canadian crutches). The book begins with the onset of her illness, which began just before a school homecoming parade on a Friday in September. The book ends with her return to school in April of the following year. For any survivor of polio during the epidemic years, this book is a realistic and accurate portrayal of what happened to many of us. Whether you were too young to remember what happened to you during your life with acute polio or you remember every detail, this book is a good read and will probably bring tears to your eyes.

The book has only 174 pages, but it is loaded with information about the polio experience that young readers might not otherwise have occasion or opportunity to learn. When you think about it, infants and preschoolers today get immunization injections for a host of diseases. By age fifteen months, a child had been immunized to Hepatitis B, Diphtheria, Pertussis (whooping cough), tetanus, Hemophilis Influenza B, Polio, Measles, German Measles, Mumps, and Chicken Pox. In the USA over time, many of these diseases will become infrequent in occurrence. Polio is already a disease belonging to the ages in the USA except for the infrequent vaccine caused occurrences. How else will the next generation know about polio, but to read about it? This book offers a vivid window into the horrors and triumphs of one polio victim.

As I mentioned, Mrs. Wilson's class wrote letters to the author to express their appreciation and admiration of the book. Peg Kehret responded to their letters and opened her letter with the following:

"Thank you for your letters. I am glad you enjoyed *Small Steps*. It was the hardest book I ever wrote, partly because it was so personal and partly because I usually write fiction. With *Small Steps*, I couldn't just change something to make it work better in the story – I had to tell the truth."

Mrs. Wilson's current fifth grade class is in the midst of reading the book. She recently asked them what they liked about *Small Steps*. Here are some of their responses.

"I just enjoy the whole book."

"She told how life with polio is."

"When she explains her life, it is really detailed."

"I like how she talks about polio and how it is with polio."

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“It was clear when she was talking about the three kinds of polio.”

“She says it with such realism and like she is talking to you.”

If you know a child age nine to twelve, I highly recommend this book for his or her reading. This book will grab one’s attention from the first page, and it is hard to put down. When we are all gone, books of this nature will probably be our best witness to educate youngsters of future generations about what happened to thousands of us in the twentieth century.

At the end of the book there is an Epilogue, which reads in part: “Forty years after the events of this book, I began to have muscle aches, foot cramps, back pain, and fatigue. I was shocked to learn that my problems were caused by my old adversary, polio. The condition is called post-polio syndrome. Thousands of former polio patients in the United States...are experiencing similar difficulties. Decades after their original illness, polio survivors are reluctantly

returning to walking sticks, braces, and wheelchairs that they fought so hard to be rid of. All these years, I have drawn inner strength from my victory over polio, feeling that if I could beat polio, I could handle anything. It was painful to discover that the enemy was not vanquished, as I had thought, but had merely gone under cover, waiting to strike once more. My battle with polio is not yet over... So far, the effects of post-polio syndrome are manageable for me. I rest more, and say no to some activities that I previously enjoyed. Aided by aspirin, exercises, and the best weapon of all, determination, the battle continues.”

References:

1. Kehret, Peg, *Small Steps, the Year I Got Polio*. Albert Whitman and Company. Morton Grove, Illinois, 1996.
2. Information provided by Elizabeth Wilson, Henrico County Elementary School Teacher.