

Get on with Living

By Linda VanAken

When we were young, we all had thoughts and ideas of what our lives would be like. Some might have thought that polio limited their possibilities for the future. I personally think polio simply changed our options, shaped our lives and expanded our horizons. I had physical limitations that steered me away from certain active roles. Being a fireman and running up stairwells or being an athlete wasn't on my radar screen. Neither was I going to pursue a career as a music teacher since I am tone deaf and that had nothing to do with polio. As a child and young adult, I had to evaluate my assets & God-given talents to decide which paths I wished to pursue in life. Polio and the residual affects didn't determine my path; instead it was simply a *factor* in the direction I took towards my life's goals. Life molds us and experiences change us. This forges the person we become. Being a polio survivor is a factor in who I am and how I function. I will not let it be a negative force, nor is it an all consuming definition of who I was, who I am or who I will be in the future.

We acknowledged that polio was a factor in our lives, but strove to overcome and not let it be the driving force in our lives. Its interference with our physical well being did impact many of the choices that we made; however, that challenge can also be a very positive thing. I often marvel at what a dynamic and accomplished group of people I am associated with due to my Post Polio Syndrome. Recently I had the pleasure of sharing a long weekend with my polio peers and their spouses. It was even pointed out that the spouses of polio survivors share a special quality as well. Our partners do not think of us as having a disability, they simply share in the challenges we face. Polio impacts our lives, but it does not always define our lives in a negative manner.

POST POLIO has become a factor in my life. It is a little more difficult to say PPS is *just* a factor and not think of it as an overwhelming roadblock to living my life. PPS is another challenge that will alter our choices, but not deter us along life's path. PPS doesn't have to stop us from living. We must change our attitude about how we "live". PPS requires management of your symptoms, but so do your finances, so do your everyday tasks. PPS is just another factor that must be considered in the plans your make for the rest of your life.

I can almost hear people scoffing at my simplistic views of the challenges of PPS. I don't mean to minimize the true challenges every person who survived polio faces. However, I do wish to encourage you to rethink the importance of PPS in your life. Yes, it is a factor, but it is NOT what you do to *live* your life. You "live" your life through the joys and sorrows, the successes and failures of everyday life. Joyful times help us to appreciate the good part of being alive. That is where we minimize PPS as a factor in life. We change our focus and make being happy a priority in life. Every single day when we wake we should celebrate and think "ok, I made it another day, so I am going to smile more often today". Every single day we need to look for one thing or event that is joyful for us.

It is difficult to fight off the sadness or depression that comes along with a physical disability. It is much easier to give into those feelings when unrelenting pain or overwhelming fatigue is a daily companion. I feel we *DESERVE* to be happy and peaceful. I readily admit that it takes hard work to be in a good mood when you feel like crap. Is it worth it? Absolutely. I have but one life and I'll be darned if I waste half of it being depressed and miserable if there is a chance that I can find ways to enjoy life and be happy.

Polio is something we "overcame". We won't be as lucky with PPS as this isn't something we can simply ignore. Instead we must cope with the ravages of our situation every single day. PPS is scary, but then so was polio. We found ways to live our lives to the fullest even though polio had changed us. We donned braces, had surgeries, used crutches, then we put polio into perspective and got on with the fine art of living. Hopefully we can face life with PPS the same way while trying out scooters and powerchairs. We may not be fortunate enough to have a true recovery period, but with good management and wise practices, we can relegate PPS to a consideration of what choices we make, rather than it being our sole focus in life.

It can be very hard to find the energy and comfort levels needed to rediscover pleasure and find joy in life. There are ways if we are creative and willing to appreciate even the simple things. Gratitude for each simple pleasure or kindness goes a long way in helping us to be more content with our circumstances. There are a lot of things I would still like to "Do" yet in life. Time, finances, and yes PPS will determine whether or not I meet my goals. No matter the journey, no matter the struggles, I hope to find ways to get on with the fine art of living and put that darn old PPS factor where it belongs... in the background, not the forefront of my life.