

Aging well with polio



Advice from Ginny and the wise elders

by Sunny Roller

In 1954, when I was six and had been walking with long leg braces and crutches for two years, my Mom and Dad bought me a little doll named Ginny. Ginny became my favorite doll of all time. She was eight inches tall, had bright blonde hair and was very portable. Ginny and I became very good friends. She had all kinds of pretty clothes and was happy with me. We even went to the Detroit Orthopedic Clinic regularly and had several polio surgeries at Children's Hospital together.

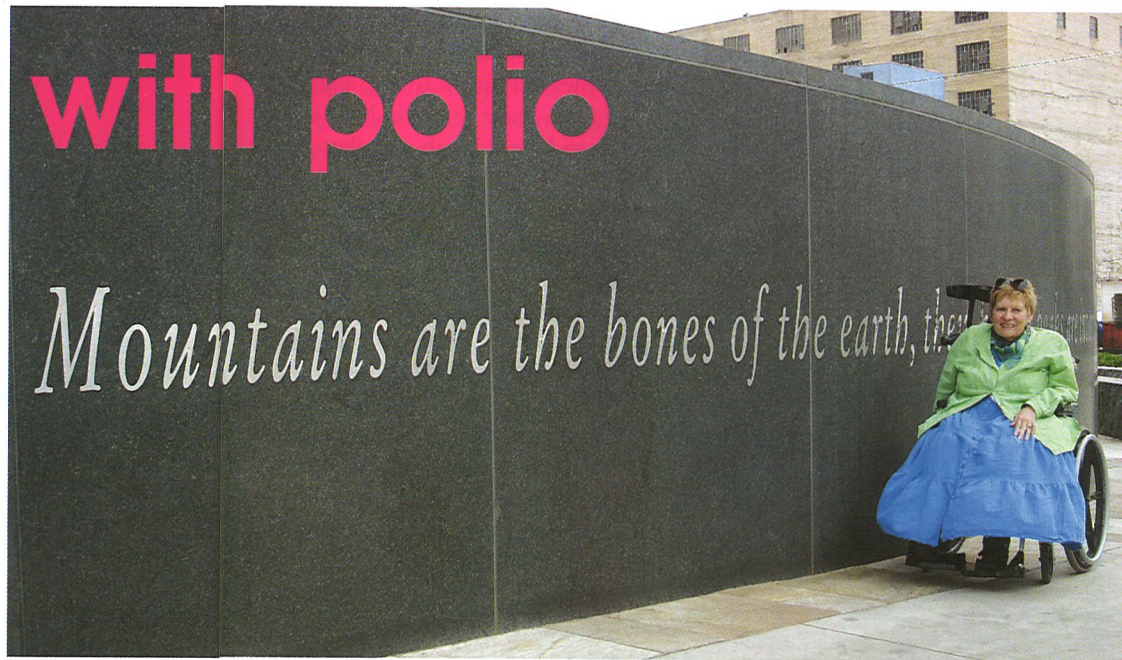
When Ginny first arrived in my arms, Mom carefully showed me that she came with a little printed heart-shaped tag around her wrist that said something very important to children about life. The tag read, "Open your heart; open your mind. Look for the best and that's what you'll find."

Today, these optimistic words drift back to me stronger than ever as I apply them to my late years as a polio

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survivor.

Statistics show that we now have the same life expectancy as our non-disabled friends. How do we, as middle-aged adults, face this time in life with hope and optimism? With the hypothetical "gift" of longevity, will our pain increase, our function decrease, our finances dry up and will we end up depressed, abused and lonely? That is scary — so scary that I decided to seek the truth about growing old successfully as a polio survivor. I was able to obtain a grant from the National Institute of Disability and Rehabilitation Research



to go to post-polio support groups all over the nation to find out how people like us are making later years work well and what advice they have for us.

My journey across the U.S. took nine months. I interviewed 15 post-polio people. They lived in five regions of the country. These were individuals designated by their support groups to be mentors on successful aging. They were the leaders, the role models, or who I like to call: "the post-polio wise elders."

I asked them questions about their lifetime issues, their perceptions of

life with a disability, what they thought their most valuable coping attitudes had been and their definition of successful late-life adaptation. I asked them what they wanted the rest of us to know.

They tell us to stay connected and open to other people including family; to continue to build and maintain a strong social network. This includes staying close to reliable friends who care what happens to us.

Building and staying close in family relationships is very important. Those who were still married exceedingly treasured having an understand-

The 15 people interviewed:

- Had had polio for more than 50 years.
- Seven were women; eight were men. Their average age was 73.
- Four walked with a cane or crutches and 11 used a wheelchair.
- All had experienced the late effects of polio and were living with some functional decline.
- Two have passed away since we met, from heart problems.
- Seven were married, six were either divorced or widowed and two were never married.
- All were living independently in their homes and had functional help doing so.
- Ninety-three percent had a partial or full college education with 29% holding a graduate degree.
- Their average age at retirement was 58 years. Most were doing volunteer work and enjoying leisure pursuits.

ing spouse. They told me that networking in the community is very important, which includes reaching out and helping others.

The suggestion from the wise elders that surprised and pleased me the most had to do with opening our hearts up more than ever to joy and pleasure. They told me how vital it is to love life and have fun. We have worked so

hard all of these years proving we could make it with a disability — raising families, earning a living, and just getting from place to place. Now is the time to let go, laugh and play again.

Perhaps more unique to polio survivors than other elders who had not grown up with a disability, they declared that it is important at this stage in life to completely accept who we really are. We need to fully embrace ourselves with our unique life stories, our polio-affected bodies with old and new physical limitations. “Accept yourself” sounds simple, but is, in reality, complicated, challenging and profound.

It is important for us to continue using our brain to adapt to life. We need to be assertive and go after what we need and want. We need to get functional help around the house or get out of the house. Also, we need to be financially prepared for this time in life or develop ways to assure more financial security for the years ahead.

Getting a good education was one of the most repeated coping tactics that people used to get through life. They advised us to continue learning and stay connected to the young minds around us.

Perhaps the final advice that struck home was their attitude toward life now. Every single wise elder told us that attitude is powerful and that it is

critical to look for the positive in all things. Most of the wise elders had a spiritual life that they could describe. Some were religious and others looked to a higher power through nature or in other ways.

In spite of their youthful sorrows, their family problems and their mid-life struggles, these polio survivors were filled with graciousness and enthusiasm for life. The information they shared is neither rocket science nor is it new. However it can affirm what we already know and help us to become aware of areas in our lives that need to be strengthened. I asked the wise elders to give me one word to describe how their lives are right now. They said: I am content; I am flourishing; my life is better now than it ever was before — it is so good it’s like a dream; I live with a sense of anticipation and hope.

Ginny whispered to me a long time ago that there is hope. And today she reminds us that if we open our hearts to people, to

ourselves as we really are and to having fun, we will be stronger. If we open our minds to assertive and clever adaptations, and to lifelong learning, we will be comfortable. And if we look for the best, stay positive and seek a spiritual focus we will remain energized. *

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