

Polio: Death of a Disease



The Series

[Series front page](#)

[Part 1: Saving India's Children](#)

[Part 2: Funding for a miracle](#)

[Part 3: Tales from U.S. polio years](#)

[Part 4: Back to Braces](#)

[Photo Galleries](#)

[Special to Web Series](#)

[Video Clips](#)

[Timeline of polio eradication](#)

[Discussion forum](#)

[Ask the experts](#)

[Resources](#)

[Related sites on the Web](#)

[How to learn more](#)

[The Inquirer](#)


Iron lungs and isolation Tales of the polio years

By Huntly Collins
Inquirer Staff Writer
February 23, 1999

They were summers of fear. All across America in the late 1940s and early 1950s, polio changed the face of childhood. Families fled the cities, swimming pools were closed, mothers fretted that an innocent frolic in a neighborhood creek could paralyze their child for life. There was no telling who would be next.

Myths about how people caught polio abounded. Some blamed flies, pollen, summer fruits. In fact, the polio virus, which lives only in people, was spread by contact with contaminated stools, often through water or food.

In the Philadelphia area, more than 1,000 children came down with polio during those years. Here are some of their stories.

 Polio in America
T-1 connection
28.8 connection



Diane Kirlin Murphy, 51, of Erdenheim, holds a 1955 photograph of herself as a March of Dimes poster child.

[More Photos](#) (Peter Tobia/Inquirer)

The not-so-glamorous life of a poster child

From her hospital bed, Diane Kirlin couldn't see the rows of iron lungs. But she could hear them - a great *swishing* sound just beyond her cubicle at Philadelphia's Hospital for Contagious Diseases.

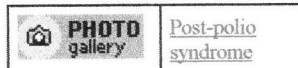
"When the nurses would turn one off, you knew that a child had died. Then they would roll the iron lung away," she recalled.

Diane was 4 in 1952, the peak of America's polio epidemic, when she and a friend both fell ill after playing in a creek.

She was paralyzed in her arms and legs, and spent 159 days in the hospital, at Front and Luzerne Streets.

At age 6, Diane became a March of Dimes poster child. With her long ringlets, frilly dresses, and custom-made white shoes, she was a picture-perfect little girl - in braces and crutches.

She was photographed with Phillies pitcher Curt Simmons. She went on the *Chief Halftown* television show. She pleaded for more donations to support research and medical care for children like herself.



But behind the smiling face, she seethed.

"My mother loved it," Diane recalled. "She loved showing me off. I didn't. I wanted to be just like everybody else."

In 1956, Diane was sent to Philadelphia's Shriners Hospitals for Crippled Children, then on Roosevelt Boulevard, for corrective surgery on her hips and knees. She did not leave for seven months.

When she arrived, she was stripped naked and scrubbed so hard it hurt.

No visitors were allowed, not even her parents. On Sundays, at the appointed time, she went to the window of her fourth-floor room and looked down. There, waving up to her, were her mother and father.

The hospital did allow mail. Diane remembers her birthday and Christmas cards arriving wet and limp, as if they had been steam-cleaned first.

After she was discharged, Diane ended up at the city's Widener Memorial School for Crippled Children at Broad and Olney. Most of the city's public and parochial schools would not enroll children with polio.

Each morning the big orange school bus pulled up to Diane's home in the Mayfair section of Northeast Philadelphia while her brother and sister walked to nearby Catholic schools. "All I wanted to do," she said, "was wear a uniform and go to school with my brother and sister."

The closest she got to that was her First Communion. St. Matthew's School, where her brother was enrolled, allowed her to take catechism classes. A neighborhood boy pulled her up to the school on Cottman Avenue in a wagon.

"I felt so proud because I was like everybody else."

More tales from the polio years

[Alice Brook Pambuena: At 7, sent away for four years](#)

[Arnold Snyder: He came home from the war to the fight of his life](#)

[Glenn Johnson: Playing 'air raid' in the polio ward](#)

[Josephine Walker: 'Lord of the Flies' in polio ward](#)

Part Four: Decades later, a trauma revived

© 1999, Philadelphia Newspapers Inc. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the express written consent of Philadelphia Newspapers Inc. is expressly prohibited.