Florence Lunde’s Polio Life

PP (prior to polio) I was an athlete, went to sleep away camp every summer and rode horseback. I was being groomed to go to a special music high school in New York City. All that changed in September 1953. I came down with a combination of spinal and bulbar polio at the age of 12 1/2. I was paralyzed from the neck down and put in an iron lung. Most of my early memories are very painful to remember for example, I received the sister Kenny treatment which were hot packs wrapped around my limbs. They were a dark gray material that itched and after that came terrible stretching of my muscles that hurt horribly. I remember when I was transferred from the acute hospital to the respirator center in another hospital in New York City. I was in the iron lung placed into a truck and away we went. When I got to the other hospital I remember going down long corridor looking up at the ceiling with the lights and looking at the physician pushing the iron lung. It was very frightening to me. I didn't know where my mother was seeing as she came along with me in the truck. Now as an adult, I assume she went to fill out the paperwork but at the time I had no idea where she went.

I was slowly weaned out of the iron lung and was given a cuirass which was a chest shell with the hose in the middle going to the respirator mechanism. I was also placed on a rocking bed which was the worst. I always feared I would slip off the end. By the age of 13 I did not need to use a respirator at all until my late 20s at which point Dr. Augusta Alba told me to use it in the evening with a mouthpiece for 20 minutes to expand my lungs. I followed her directions and did quite well for about 45 years and then started needing night time ventilation. Today I use the vent with a mouthpiece from about 5:30 PM until the next morning when I get up at 7:30 AM.

During my teenage years up to my early 30s It was very important to me to be just like everyone else. I started smoking at the age of 16 because everybody else did and this was something I could do just like everyone else. I remember one winter I washed my hair and went out with it wet because so did every other teenager, however I came down with pneumonia when the other teens did not.

Other than that my health was good. Once I started to understand that I was not like every other teenager and that I needed to take care of myself and not try to imitate what other people did my health improved I had fewer colds and bronchitis every winter. Of interest is that since I moved to Florida I think I have had two upper respiratory infection in the 15 years I'm here.

I was on home instruction for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades returning to regular high school in the 10th grade. I was the first disabled student to go around from class to class just like everybody else. They appointed another student to take me from classic class and she got credit. Back then they did not have motorized wheelchairs and I was not able to push the manual wheelchair so a student took me from class to class.

Speaking of motorized wheelchairs, the first time I got into the motorized chair I went up and down the corridor of the hospital and upon returning to the occupational therapist I burst into tears saying "I have been let out of prison.” I had freedom now I could go and come whenever I wanted to, go where I wanted to and do what I wanted to. I was not dependent anymore on people taking me someplace. For the first few months of using the motorized wheelchair I could not sit still I had to constantly move. For example my husband loved to wax his car I would go and sit with him while he waxed the car. All of a sudden I had to move I remember saying to him I will be back and I took off went around the block and came back. I don't remember how long this behavior lasted but I would venture a guess to say a few months.

I went to New York University for my undergrad and graduate work in Speech – language pathology. I worked at an inner city hospital in New York city for 29 years in the department of rehabilitation medicine and my area of focus was patients who sustained a cardiovascular event demonstrating language dysfunction. I retired because my body couldn't do it anymore. I was constantly tired and cranky.

I have also received my graduate certificate in Christian ministry from the King’s seminary. I have authored three Christian books. The first one is God's word for you which focuses on how God brought me through the early days of polio, experiences I had, including peoples reaction to me now that I had a disability. The second and third books are sister books: Digging Deeper: the Devotional and Digging Deeper: the Bible study. They are organized by theme. All purchasable on Amazon just type in my name.

God has played a major role in my life. He took away my anger, bitterness, my depression and filled me with his Holy Spirit and gave me a newness of life with joy and peace. My husband and I started a ministry for people with physical disabilities in New York City called His Abundant Love Ministries. It was a once a month group that met for 29 years before we retired. We saw many people saved and lives changed. Our television show on Bronx Net, won three Beta awards.

My husband was a paraplegic from a construction accident. We were married for 42 years before he passed away in 2013 from dementia. We traveled extensively using travel agencies for the disabled. A funny vignette happened in Israel. The elevator was so small that a wheelchair user had to remove the foot-pedals in order for the door to close. Well this one young lady couldn't put her foot pedals back on fast enough when the elevator stopped for her to get out so she kept going up and down until somebody was able to help and all the doors open. The rest of us just sat and waved to her as she came to our floor it was so funny at the time.

I am now 81 years of age and post polio syndrome has done a number on me. Not only am I constantly tired, but I have lost strength, my balance is off and the fatigue is at times overwhelming. Whereas I used to live alone before I got married and took care of myself completely, now I need a caregiver to help me with all ADLs. There are times when it wears me down usually when I think back to what I was able to do and now cannot. I am a full-time motorized wheelchair user and as I said I use a vent at night.

The support I need as I get older is that I need more and more help to live independently. There has to be a system set in place where people that worked all their lives, making a good salary with good retirement benefits to receive some financial aid to pay for the caregiver. At the time of this writing in Florida, USA the going rate per hour is $23 which gets costly.