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Alice Brook Pambuena: At 7, sent away for four years

By Huntly Collins
Inquirer Staff Writer
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All summer long, she was the roller-skate champ of the 6200 block of Norwood Street in Germantown.

But late that August in 1945, after playing in an amusement-park pool, Alice Brook got up to go to the bathroom and fell.

Polio had paralyzed her legs.

Alice, 7, spent four weeks at the city's Hospital for Contagious Diseases and was then transferred to the Home of the Merciful Saviour in West Philadelphia.

The program, funded by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, provided care for poor children with polio.

Alice was never told exactly why she was sent there, but she believes her mother, who also had a 3-year-old at home, felt too overwhelmed to care for her. Her father worked for the city, repairing voting machines. Money was always tight.

What Alice thought would be just a short visit turned into four years.



Alice Pambuena, 60, hugs her longtime friend Ann Silcox, 61, in front of the home at 44th and Baltimore where they spent time when they came down with polio. They have remained best friends since then. (Peter Tobia/Inquirer)



A 10-year-old Alice Pambuena wears the outfit the school headmistress bought for her.

(Peter Tobia/Inquirer)

best friend, Ann Silcox.

Seven years later, after corrective surgery on her foot, Alice was sent back to the polio home to recuperate. Her mother set off on the bus to the Easter Seal Society, hoping to get help with her daughter's hospital bill.

Alice never saw her mother again. On the way to the agency, her mother collapsed on the street when a blood vessel burst and died after emergency surgery.

There were several dozen children at the home, most of them girls. They were treated with hot packs and physical therapy, and then fitted for wheelchairs, braces and crutches.

Alice, who had a brace on one leg and a crutch, had a recurring dream. In it, she would break into an exhilarating run.

Everybody at the home went to its one-room school. It had art and music. There were field trips that allowed the children to explore a world beyond the institution's walls.

Alice remembers headmistress Miss Thompson (the girls called her "Thompsie") taking an interest in each child.

One winter, when Alice's parents fretted that they could not afford to outfit their daughter, Thompsie called Alice into her office. She handed her a new brown tweed coat with matching leggings.

Alice and the other girls became like sisters. When Alice finally persuaded her parents to take her home in fall 1949, it was especially hard to say goodbye to her

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