

Gramps' Grit

My grandpa contracted polio at the young age of sixteen. He survived a painful environment and the very disease that killed many around him. Now, at the age of 83, he is battling to do everyday tasks such as breathing and walking as a result of Post Polio Syndrome. As a healthy teen and an active senior he has confronted a debilitating disease head on.

It started out on just another day, on October 16, 1950. After complaining to his parents about strange aches and pains, doctors confirmed their fears; it was polio. He and his parents were scared, for eight years they had seen this disease destroy families. He was rushed by ambulance to the hospital, and was placed in an iron lung; an artificial breathing cylinder. The virus had paralyzed his chest muscles. Without the iron lung most of the polio patients would have died. For two days my grandpa fought to survive in the lung.

For almost a year, he worked to regain control of his body at a rehabilitation clinic. Hot packs were placed on his arms and legs. Then the staff painfully stretched his limbs. Besides the physical work, to be able to walk again, was the emotional and mental toll. Every day was a challenge. While he was there he saw many boys leave in leg braces giving him hope to walk again himself. Others left in wheelchairs, knowing they would never walk again. Most terrifying was seeing some of the boys die. Fortunately, my grandpa was released from the clinic and his mother continued the hot pack and painful stretching on her dining room table so he could make a full recovery. He regularly went dancing with the girls.

He married and raised a family. He was active. But, as time went on he was less active. As kids, my mom and uncles shoveled the heavy Minnesota snow. He didn't go for walks with us grandkids at the zoo. He finally went to a number of doctors. He had lost 40% of his lung

capacity. His muscles were dying. He was choking when he ate because his neck and jaw muscles had significantly weakened. He saw a specialist in 2010. He was diagnosed with Post Polio Syndrome.

Gramps is 83 and doing his daily stretches and exercises. He won't regain what he has lost, but he is fighting against decline. He needs a solid chair so his legs don't buckle when he stands. He uses a cane or the handy arm of a grandson to walk. He has to chew each bite like a toddler before swallowing so he doesn't choke. He has a great attitude and is a goal setter, so I know he will be determined to master his new therapy routine.

When he visited this fall we talked a lot about polio as he was preparing to share his experience with a Rotary club. He told me one thing most of today's generations don't know, is that there are actually three types of polio. My grandpa had two of them, spinal and bulbar. Bulbar polio almost always leads to death, and spinal polio usually leaves patients in wheelchairs. Very luckily, Gramps didn't die or get placed in a wheelchair. He told me that he believes the reason he is still alive and doing well compared to other polio victims, is because he had two types. He thinks the two counteracted, and thus didn't deliver the full possible blow.

As a teenager my grandpa fought against the deterioration of his body. He persistently suffered through the therapy to be active with his brothers and friends. He went to dances with his shoes polished. Now, at the age of 83, he is constantly doing his stretches and exercise routines. He faces the physical and mental battle of everyday tasks such as breathing and walking as a result of Post Polio Syndrome. He gets his laces tied and his cane in hand to walk laps. As a healthy teen and an active senior he has confronted the debilitating disease of Polio without complaining or flinching.