

Joan Keller Adams, Our Mom, is a Polio Survivor

Written with Love by Children - Kurt, Lynn and Lori



Mom finished high school in 1954 and completed a four year Bachelor of Science program in three years, graduating in 1957. She qualified for Phi Beta Kappa, the prestigious National Honor Society. She got married, had three children, drove a car using a strap to hold her leg in place, worked several different jobs and traveled the world. As her polio specialist, Dr. Strasser, said recently; people with polio needed to put in 80% effort compared to the normal persons 30%, so they were fighters and very successful.

In 1944, when Mom was 8 years old, she, her three younger siblings and her parents spent the summer at a camp in upstate NY. Grandma was the camp nurse and Grandpa was a camp counselor. Mom's younger brother Charles died of what they originally thought was double pneumonia. Later, they determined it was actually polio. Two weeks later, after burying Charles, Mom began having chest pain. The doctor did a blood test and determined her white count was extremely high and that she needed to go to the hospital to have tests done. Mom walked into the hospital, and that was the last time she could walk for two years.

Her temperature was elevated, and they did a spinal tap. They moved mom from that hospital into a contagious hospital, which was one long room with roughly sixteen or eighteen beds. This was at the height of the polio epidemic and there was a shortage of nurses. She was there for five weeks on the serious list. They finally put her in the Sunshine Cottage, which housed only polio patients. Every time a patient would whimper a little bit, the nurses would give them another codeine pill. When the paralysis started, Mom couldn't even talk. She tried, but her larynx and pharynx were affected by polio. There would be a group of interns at her bedside and they would have a hypodermic needle on the table. Each intern would have to prick her with a needle to determine if she had any feeling in that body part.

The polio epidemic expanded so rapidly that they had to train specialists overnight as very few had any experience with it. The nurses were trained to use the treatment methods Sister Kenny promoted to treat polio. Mom was supposed to be in hot packs four times a day while she was at that home, and the heat helped her spasms. While Mom was in Sunshine Cottage there was an iron lung right outside her room. The staff was so convinced she would need it they had already measured her for it. Thankfully, she never did.

Grandma was the reason mom survived polio. Once while checking on mom in her hospital bed she found her very close to death. A hospital volunteer had fed mom chunks of apple and unknowingly left her with a chunk lodged in her throat. Grandma was able to dislodge the apple and that was the last time she left mom in anyone else's care.

She came home from Sunshine Cottage by ambulance, and the medics just picked her up and carried her in. She could move her fingers and her toes upward, but that was the extent of her mobility. Her father made a stretcher with canvas that they would put in the bathtub. Her mother would carry her up the stairs and put her on the canvas and do her exercises in the water twice a day, as well as apply hot packs four times a day. Mom hated those exercises and hot packs because they were very painful. She was unable to move for 2 years. She was also tutored at home during this time.

Mom had ten foot operations. The first was a triple arthrodesis, where they try to stabilize the foot, so her foot would not drop. After that failed, they then stabilized them. Her ankles were later fused at a 90 degree angle allowing her to walk with a cane. Her toes have become a mess.

When Dad was stationed at Eglin Air Force base, Mom would take us to the pool during the day. We had the pool to ourselves, and we couldn't get enough of it. When we got older, Mom would take us to swim practice and meets. She would help keep score or stand for hours at the pool edge as a timer. She would drop us off and pick us up from practice. She made us huge colorful towels from terrycloth and added frilly borders for us girls.

Mom worked as dad's dental assistant, bookkeeper, appointment maker, x-ray developer, etc. Once a month mom completed the dreaded patient billing by hand, which could take a full week to complete. She has a permanent bend in the writing fingers of her right hand as a result of years of writing out the bills. Even with everything else on her plate mom always had a homemade meal on the table for us. She also helped with our homework.

Mom would make trips and outings an adventure. She would ask which direction we wanted to go when leaving the driveway. If she was lost, we never knew it because she always remained calm and kept it fun. Several times over summer break mom would drive us from our home in Suffern, NY, visiting relatives in Pennsylvania and Ohio, ending at our grandparent's home in Rio Rancho, NM. She would occasionally cook meals, like a pot roast, on the engine. We were lucky to have encountered nice, helpful people whenever we had car troubles.

During her years in the hospital mom was a voracious reader of books, which started her love of words. Over the years we would test mom's vocabulary by asking her to spell and provide a definition for random challenging words out of a dictionary. She always nailed the spelling and definition – every time!

Mom is and always has been a fighter and an inspiration. She is one of the smartest individuals we have ever known. She has done so much for her family, and we are eternally grateful that we are fortunate enough to have her as our mom.