

I Used to Jump Puddles

A Polio Story by Gary Buchanan – 2003

My polio story all began way back in 1951 when my life was changed forever.

I was an ordinary mischievous seven year old boy with the world as my oyster.

My family moved to a great place called Yowie Bay which was an outlying area of Miranda NSW in 1948 and it was a kid's paradise.

We were surrounded by dirt tracks, bush and swimming holes, our road itself being no more than a dirt track which ably served horses and carts though.

Yowie Bay had no shops except a general store on the waterfront that also doubled as a bank, post office, bottle shop and also sold petrol from a bowser out the front.

Our visitors to home were endless, there was the milkman, the iceman, the baker, the clothesprop man, the toilet man, the Rawleighs man, the library man and the fruit and veg man, all who had stories to tell.

We lived next door to a paddock where there was a horse, goat and a cow that would come up to our makeshift wire fence and talk to us. Yes life could not have been much better in those days, until

Three years later

I remember the day I was on the school bus going home from Miranda Primary School to Yowie Bay and because the bus was packed I was standing at the top of the stairs when a big boy who had just realised the bus had gone past his stop jumped off and took me with him.

The next thing I remember is lying by the side of the road and being cared for by my mum, a policeman and two ambulance drivers who suggested to mum that as there appeared to be no broken bones that it would be best for them to take me home and for mum to phone the local doctor to come and check me out.

I had suffered apparently, along with a nasty gash to my head, concussion as well, to which the doctor advised mum I was to rest in darkness for at least three days and to be kept very quiet.

When I returned to school the next week I was treated like a hero as the boy who flew from the bus.

Sadly though, for the next two weeks I had lost all energy, felt lethargic and completely out of sorts and little did I know due to partly I suppose to my loss of stamina that when the enemy came a week later I had no resistance to fight it.

A week later in February 1951 ...

It was a hot summer's afternoon after school and I was playing catchings with a tennis ball with my two mates Peter Sorensen and John Stewart and I remember they made fun of me because I kept dropping the ball which was something I rarely did.

I remember also feeling sick and developing a bad headache and reluctantly giving up the game and going inside to mum.

The moment mum checked me out she sent me straight to bed and she told me I had a very high temperature and if I was no better in the morning she would have the doctor come.

I ate very little if anything that night and the next thing I knew mum was coming in the next morning to see how I was.

I told her I wasn't really feeling well at all so she suggested she would help me to the bathroom so I could freshen up a bit.

Then the world fell in I tried to sit up but couldn't move and with even the slightest movement felt agonising pain.

I still see the look on mum's face as she said as mums do ... "*Don't move*" ... as if ... "*and I'll get help*".

She bolted down the road to our nearest neighbour, Mrs Kentwell, and asked her if she could mind my two young sisters while she ran to the nearest phone to call for the doctor.

At the time of these last few weeks dad was in Concord Hospital and had just had major surgery so mum was on her own with us.

The rest of the day was a bit of a blur ... I remember Dr Kellow coming and checking me painfully over and then he went and later came back with Dr Boxhall who both then left and came back about 5 pm with two more doctors who they told mum came from Macquarie Street.

I was told much later that our dining room was just like King Arthur's Court with all these people seated around the round table deciding on my fate.

It's a pity nobody said, "*Hang him*".

The next thing I remember was lying in the back of an ambulance being taken to Prince Henry Hospital and asking mum if she could ask the man to put the siren on.

The siren was the last thing I heard ...

I vaguely recall sometime being in this box with just my head on the outside and hearing thunkerty thunk, thunkerty thunk.

They had apparently put me in an iron lung until such time as I could breathe unassisted.

I woke up one morning about two months later and even though I couldn't really move my head I could see I was in a place where I was surrounded by other beds that had lots of little kids like me in them.

I was encouraged to go to the toilet by having this rubber pan thing put under me and I had to drink masses of this yukky liquorice sort of stuff to start me going, boy did I hate that stuff.

Sand bags were laid along each side of my body to stop any movement, not that I was able to move, and I virtually just had to lay there.

We were only allowed visitors once a week and that was for an hour on Sundays and that was only through a glass window.

I remember the first time I saw my dad after all that time he had been away and all the time I had been away from home, it was the first time in my life I remember having received a shock.

Before dad went to hospital he had black wavy curly hair and here was this stranger standing there weeks later with streaks of grey, he just didn't look like my dad.

I can only imagine now how mum and dad must have felt thinking they might lose their son.

Polio not only affected me but all those around me who loved me as well.

One day as I just lay there the ward sister came with my mum, actually right up to my bed the nearest I had been to mum for weeks and I remember crying as I felt mum's hand on my arm.

The news was that mum was there to accompany me in the ambulance where I was to be taken to St George Hospital at Kogarah which was much closer to home for visiting, and visiting was three times a week there.

Could it get any better than that?

I spent almost two years there and most of it was strapped to an iron frame to keep my body stable.

Sister Murray who was in charge of the children's ward was really terrific when I look back, even though the nurses thought of her as a tyrant.

She went out of her way for me by having the hospital engineer make me a piece of equipment similar to a periscope so as I could look out the window and had them make a glass top frame for me which books could be opened and laid across so I could read.

The nurses always prayed I would be given thin golden books so as they wouldn't have to turn over too many pages.

Every day a physiotherapist, Miss Temperley, would come and undo each of my limbs and try to get them mobile. It used to pain like the dickens and I used to scream the place down and call her for everything, yet it was Miss Temperley who got me walking and it was Miss Temperley who sent me Christmas presents for the next ten years.

When I finally left hospital I had a calliper on each leg, a steel body brace and walked with the aid of crutches, a true man of steel.

For the next three years that I attended primary school I was picked up from home three mornings a week by ambulance, transported to St George for physio then taken back to school.

Most times I wouldn't arrive back at school until about 1:30 pm and because I was considered to be somewhat of a cheeky devil and always caused chaos in the class by disrupting everybody at the time of my arrival, the teachers thought it more appropriate if I

went straight to the library instead of class after hospital and assist by covering and repairing books.

I never ceased to be amazed that in reality with only two days a week education I was able to finish primary school with marks that enabled me to be accepted by Sutherland High and put in 1A, a two language class. I even got to be voted as class captain.

If I thought this was how life was I was wrong as at the completion of first year my specialist decided to have me admitted to hospital for a spinal fusion operation, due to the problem I had developed because of throwing my leg out while walking with my large calliper which had in turn thrown my hip and spine out.

I remember arriving at hospital at the ripe old age of thirteen and immediately being harnessed in yet again another steel frame with weights off each end to stretch me.

The session on the rack lasted for three months when the doctor realised that I had not quite as yet stopped growing and my operation would have to be deferred for another two years in his estimation.

This was all very well except during those next two years I had to wear a full plaster cast from my neck to over my hips to stop any further deterioration to my spine and hips after their fine stretching job.

During the summer months it was agony I remember with my cast being soaked with perspiration and not being able to scratch the unbearable itchiness.

The cast was only changed every six months by suspending me from the ceiling by a support under my neck and once it was removed each time believe me you couldn't get too close to it as it was really on the nose.

For the first year of this period I was able to continue my schooling by correspondence from a place called Blackfriars College which wasn't too bad but the following year back at school with the plaster cast was hell.

Ultimately at the age of fifteen I was again admitted to hospital for the spinal fusion but not before another stretch session .

At the time of this latest stretch session I developed an allergy to the elastoplast that secured my leg weights so that all the weights had to be transferred to hang off my neck over the head of the bed.

The nurses would have to manually ease off the weights during meal time so that the pressure could be eased off from under my chin and I could eat and those five minutes three times a day felt like heaven.

Eventually the operation was performed and even though I contracted pneumonia afterwards and nearly died I came through fighting fit.

The relief of not having a plaster cast any more I could not put into words, but then at the age of sixteen I did a very stupid thing and threw away my callipers as I did not consider them to be chic magnets, something which I have deeply regretted.

At sixteen years old I was fortunate to obtain a job on my first application and joined a printing company as a trainee accountant which necessitated three nights of college a week in accountancy class.

The managing director Mr Colin Begg, God love him, decided after three years my personality did not suit the serious attitude an accountant should possess and had me trained in management.

At the ripe old age of twenty-five I had attained the position of Assistant Manager, Office Manager at thirty, Production Manager at thirty-five, and General Manager at thirty-nine.

Upon the death of the managing director the other directors voted that while the company was in a viable situation it should be sold, so we were purchased by a Printing Group which at the time owned nineteen other printing businesses and of which I was given the position of Sales Administrator overall.

I was forty years old at the time, had been happily married for the past five years, and thought my life is now secure.

Roughly though about six years further down the track things started to go wrong. I began suffering pain constantly and falling for no apparent reason as well as not being able to sleep.

My doctors were not able to help me and were at a loss as to what was happening.

By the time I turned forty-nine I was unfortunately forced to quit my position due to continued pain and unexplained physical failings.

My wife though who is a very astute little person decided there must be an answer and came upon in her investigations a condition called Post-Polio Syndrome.

She located an organisation called Post-Polio Network (NSW) Inc and made it her business to attend all their meetings to learn all she could about this newly discovered condition.

She became so engrossed with the organisation she is now serving on the committee as their Publicity Officer and I must say does a great job even though we have entirely different outlooks on most things.

My physical condition continues to deteriorate but as I now know the reason, I accept it more readily with a greater understanding as to what is happening to me.

I would personally like to thank the Post-Polio Network as well as the American Disability Board for their continued support, and I still can remember that I used to jump puddles.