

Heather Bolstler on the Polio NSW 2018 Country Conference in Port Macquarie

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Anne Keen



Although Heather Bolstler now lives in the Manning Valley, she enjoys returning to Canada for holiday. Photo supplied

Heather Bolstler was seven years old when she was diagnosed with polio.

It was 1953 in Alberta, Canada.

She remembers refusing help and falling down in the medical waiting room. Her determination was about to be put through its paces, as she was about embark a life-long journey filled with challenges.

Being a highly infectious disease, Heather spent a week in a hospital isolation ward, followed by many months of hard rehabilitation work.

“I was paralysed through the entire left-hand side of my body for several months,” Heather explained.

After her initial recovery, Heather returned to school every day wearing a brace on her lower left leg.

“I suffered the challenges of being different,” she recalled. *“Being the slowest runner, being one of the last picked for team sports.”*

“For a competitive individual, that was a challenge.”

Then there were multiple surgeries on her leg and ankle, each requiring months of wearing a cast and learning to walk again.

“Like most post-polio people, I toughed it all out like a champion,” she said. “But I’m sure the experience left life-long scars.”

Heather talks about polio in stages. Stage one being the period of infection, stage two being the two to three years after retraining the body to function again, stage three being when people were immunised and the world thought it was all over and finally, stage four being the onset of post-polio syndrome.

Decades after the initial infection, polio survivors began to report new symptoms including slowly progressive muscle weakness, unaccustomed fatigue and, at times, muscle atrophy; Heather being one of them.

Heather moved to Australia in 1983 with her husband and two children, working in Sydney until retiring to Mitchells Island in the Manning Valley.

Having had polio has also made me, and many other polio survivors, a stronger and more driven individual.

Heather Bolstler

She is part of the Port Macquarie Support Group that meets bi-monthly. On Saturday September 22, the group is hosting Polio NSW 2018 Country Conference in Port Macquarie.

The conference is designed to provide information about issues and services relevant to people living with the late effects of polio and their families to help improve their lives, as well as raising awareness in the community about post-polio syndrome.

To the wider community, their message is that polio may have gone from Australia but survivors are still here.

“Having had polio has also made me, and many other polio survivors, a stronger and more driven individual. I think most of us would agree that that has been a double-edged sword.”

“I have never been able to walk long distances, to ski, to wear high-heeled shoes, to dance all night – all things that I know would have otherwise been part of my lifestyle.”

In 1955, the Salk vaccine, first effective polio vaccine, was released in the United States and reached Australia in 1956. According to the NSW Government as at 2012, Australia is currently free from polio due to the high rates of immunisation against the virus.

“If you’d lived through that experience, you couldn’t help but want everyone on the planet to have access to the vaccine,” Heather said. “Many parts of the world still have polio outbreaks and until the disease is eradicated, no one is completely safe.”

For more information about the support group of the conference contact Gail Hassall on 6581 4759 and 0431 881 237.

<https://www.portnews.com.au/story/5631477/living-with-the-later-stages-of-polio/>