

Unprotected People #105

Polio

Polio Survivor Recalls Tragic Loss of Twin and Classmates

Janice Flood Nichols, author of "Twin Voices: A Memoir of Polio, the Forgotten Killer," was diagnosed with polio as a child, as was her twin brother. Her twin brother was lost to the disease, but Janice survived and became one of the polio pioneers who were given the Salk vaccine in 1954. She earned a BA in psychology from Seton Hill University and an MEd in rehabilitation counseling from the University of Pittsburgh. She is committed to the eradication of polio.

For many years I have watched and listened as the anti-vaccine lobby spreads misinformation about vaccines. More alarming still, I have heard mothers profess that their children do not need the polio vaccine because polio is no longer a problem in our country. These well-meaning mothers even go so far as to pronounce that their healthy children will be spared because they keep squeaky-clean homes.

My twin brother Frankie and I came from one of those squeaky-clean homes. We were a healthy, rambunctious, happy twosome until fall 1953. Here's our story.

My 6-year-old twin had suffered from a head cold for a few days, nothing serious. On the day before Halloween, Frankie had trouble breathing. He was rushed to City Hospital for Communicable Diseases in Syracuse, New York, where he was promptly given a spinal tap and placed in an iron lung. By the next morning, a diagnosis of polio had been confirmed.

Later that day, I was brought to the hospital to receive massive doses of gamma globulin, the only treatment known to sometimes lessen or prevent a case of polio. Frankie died on the evening of November 1, 1953, just 61 hours after admission to the hospital. I was admitted to the same hospital, with a diagnosis

of paralytic polio, on the night Frankie was buried. A few days later my mother suffered a miscarriage. Eight children out of our first-grade classroom of 24 were soon diagnosed with paralytic polio; three children died including my twin. Ours was a story repeated all too often before a vaccine was available.



In spring 1954 (while still in the throes of intensive physical therapy), I was one of 1,829,916 children in the United States, Canada, and Finland who participated in the Salk vaccine trial, the largest vaccine trial in the history of the world. They called us "Polio Pioneers" as the successful production of a polio vaccine would benefit all present and future children — we were proud little kids! The

following spring the vaccine was licensed. So vital was this vaccine that President Dwight Eisenhower signed an executive order to provide manufacturing protocol to 75 nations free of charge.

Today the world is close to global polio eradication, but the disease remains endemic in three countries. A few years ago, nearly half of the world's cases took place in the European Region. For this reason, public health professionals remind us that polio is a disease that is just a plane trip away, ready to pounce on unvaccinated children and adults.

I have included a photo of the Flood twins taken a few months before Frankie died. To this day, I hate to have my picture taken. You see, someone has been missing since 1953!