

Eileen Kelly – My Story

My family came down to Melbourne from Wodonga early in 1945. I remember starting school at the Star of the Sea convent in Beaconsfield Parade. I was six years old and can remember feeling very stiff and sore.

My mother took me to the old Children's Hospital in Rathdowne Street, Carlton. My next memory was being put on my side and having what I now know to be a lumber puncture. My next memory was of a small lady with a cigarette in her mouth coming to the ward surrounded by a lot of doctors.

She was telling them off after they had all tried to straighten me, and saying that I had infantile paralysis – Poliomyelitis - not the meningitis I was being treated for. This wonderful lady was to become Dame Jean MacNamara. I later learned that my mother had arrived at the hospital a month later with my brother and he was also diagnosed as having polio. My brother Brian and I were sent to the Fairfield Hospital in the same ambulance. I was put in a respirator and had sand bags placed around me. We were there for some time – I think about six months. My mother was only able to see us through a glass window.

From there we were sent to Frankston Orthopaedic Hospital where Brian spent the next three years. We were placed in splints. Mine was called a double Thomas. Apart from the physiotherapy and being pushed out onto the wide veranda in the sun and getting very sunburnt, I was also learning to read and waiting for the teacher to come and turn the pages. I remember being taken to the warm swimming pool and being put on a board which they would wind down into the pool. I also remember being turned over in the bed. I think the slats that the splint was attached to must have been on some sort of swivel which was attached to the bed ends and being suspended face down. While at Frankston, I contracted diphtheria and I remember being sent back to Fairfield. I was later returned to Frankston. I cannot think about Frankston without thinking about the wonderful Uncle Bobs. When Brian was sent home, I felt they were my only friends and certainly my only visitors. My mother was only able to visit about once a month and I never saw my older brother.

I was transferred back to the Children's Hospital to have the first of many operations. After the operation, I went to Hampton Hospital. My memory of Hampton is of being wheeled into a spare ward and being left there all day because I wet the bed, and of the nurse who slapped my face for doing it.

I was eventually returned to what I had come to see as my home, Frankston, where I was stretched by my neck and put in plaster cast from my neck to my bottom. I had to wear this whenever I was out of bed. I was to learn to sit up, walk on crutches, hop up and down stairs and, of course, more school work. It was now almost five years since I was admitted to hospital and a saint of a man called Dr McClosky and his junior, the lovely Mr Peter Williams (who was later to become the head of orthopaedics at the new Children's Hospital), suggested that I should be able to spend time with my family – a house full of strangers. I now had two younger sisters, an older brother, and a mother who I did not know. I remember one weekend at home when my two brothers took me to the pictures. I was in my splint on a long pram and I remember them pushing me fast and then running in front of me . . . there was no-one behind the pram! I hated those weekends at "home".

It broke my heart when I was finally discharged from Frankston. By now I was on sticks and was enrolled in a "normal" school. I still had three more operations to come. It was useless me going to school because of this, so my schooling actually finished in grade six. I was thirteen years old. My mother took me to someplace - I think it was Parliament House - and received permission for me to leave school.

Life went on and I started work in a clothing factory. I didn't last very long as the sewing room was upstairs. I was married at sixteen and had two babies by my eighteenth birthday. Needles to say, I divorced thirteen years later. By now I had been through the University of Hard Knocks. My working life after this was mess until I turned thirty, when I was lucky enough to be employed as clerical assistant in a tertiary institution. I spent the next twenty five years working in two of them, climbing the administrative ladder. I am proud to say I was very good at what I did. By the time I was in my fifties, our old friend had started to show its face again. I was diagnosed with Post Polio Syndrome ten years ago. For the first few years I tried to ignore it, but now I'm old enough and wise enough to acknowledge it and accept it.

I feel it is important to recognise the original Polio Network Officer, Beth Brodribb, as the person who calmed me when I was in despair.