

Keith Whitthread's Story



Just because I am not fit enough to work does not mean I am not fit enough to live!

I was born in England in 1945 and had polio when I was about 18 months old. I was sick one day, and the next day I could not walk. Mum took me to the doctor and he said that I had *“lost my baby balance – bring him back next week”*. I did start to walk again but it was not until I was 3 ½ that mum found out I had had polio.

In 1959 we came to Australia. I went to school for 1 ½ years then started work as a cabinet maker. I then worked 20 years as a carpenter on the railways. After 30 year of working, I had to stop. In Easter 1990 I went to Ballarat to visit a friend. During that time, I went to see an orthopedic specialist at St John of God Hospital who told me I had post polio syndrome and was finished work. So, I then moved to my friend's place and became a volunteer at Sovereign Hill.

I have been volunteering for 13 years now and still enjoy it. I activate a miners hut on the diggings once a week. Through other volunteers I got asked to a military encampment run by other re-enactment people. Because I am a good camp cook I was asked to join the group. I now do 1788-1880 Australia, 1750-1850 North America (mainly the 1825-1850 mountain man period), also the Vikings and Celts from Dublin 1000 years ago. I do a lot of different kinds of craft work, making all my own cloths and equipment. At the moment, I am making a lot of copies of Viking jewelry in silver and bronze using the lost wax casting method. Some of the things I am making are going to England, Sweden, the USA, as well as Australia.

I take part in public and school displays and also go to camps where some of us camp and dress the way people did in the time period we are re-enacting. I wouldn't have the friends I have if I didn't do what I do now. I look forward to the camps where I can sit with my friends and enjoy some good friendship, good food and some good sippin'. We don't drink much . . .

I always have been interested in history and through this I have met some wonderful people including Aboriginal and Maori people. I am respected as an elder because of my knowledge and skills. We talk about a lot of cultural things. I am also respected as an elder by some white people.

Us polio people must keep our hands and minds active and do what we can and live our lives as best we can. As I said at the start – just because we are not fit enough to work does not mean we are not fit enough to live!

All the best to all polio survivors and their partners.