

Tricia Malowney's Story



My name is Tricia Malowney. I contracted Polio at the age of 4 months in 1954 and I believe I am one of the youngest Australian born Polios. I was born in Footscray and my parents lived in Yarraville, up the road from my Grandma and Grandpa. I am the second of 10 children and have been “mainstreamed” all my life. When I contracted Polio, my mother was 24 years old, with a 2 year old toddler – and all the dreams of young couples. She was told not to worry too much about me, that I would be paralysed, never be able to do much and go and have more healthy children. Well she had more healthy children, but her attitude was “nobody tells me my child will not walk” and I did, but with much hard work from Mum and

Dad. My earliest memories are of Mum doing my exercises – and both of us crying because it hurt. I was included in every activity – even in my “Double Thomas” splint – which looked a little like a cross of St Andrews – strapped in, arms outstretched, legs akimbo. There I was – at the picnic, at the party, at the shopping centre, around the house – Tricia included in all photos – a real member of the family and not only my immediate family – I was accepted by all my family, aunts, uncles, cousins. I was just me. We are a very outgoing family, noisy and fun loving eager to have our say, with no-one getting special treatment – my disability was not an issue. When my sister Cath was asked what was “wrong” with me, she didn’t know what they meant. She asked another family member and was told I had swallowed a monkey – this seemed reasonable to her, so she returned to school and let everyone know that that was why I wore callipers!

I walked when I was about 3 years of age, which must have been hard on Mum, with a 5 year old, a 3 year old just starting to walk (with my legs in two little callipers), a one year old just starting to walk and a baby due any minute. (yes, 4 children aged 5 and under – my parents, my heroes) I started school in Yarraville and we moved to Mitcham in 1960. When Mum went to enrol us at the new school, she was told there were no vacancies. She asked if this was because I had a disability and two places were found. These were the days when children with disabilities were not expected to attend “normal” schools – my Parents were, and are, ahead of their time.

I went to Belgrave for secondary school and the rest of my family went to a closer school. It was not because of my disability, but because the closer school did not have a girls section when I was ready to attend. I left school at 16 at the end of form 5, and I started work for the State Bank. I stayed there for 4 years and then became restless. I went to the Northern Territory to be a radio operator in an Aboriginal Community working for Catholic Missions. When I came home after a year, I didn’t want to work in an office so I got a job packing books at Gordon and Gotch. After saving for a year, I had enough to venture overseas – so because everyone was going to England, I went to America. I stayed with Mum’s cousin in Williamsburg Virginia, using her house as a base, travelling about the country by bus. I was away from home for 5 months. I had to come home to be bridesmaid to my sister Cath.

When I did come home it was time to get a real job – so Dad said to try the railways – so I tried for a job as a waitress on a train – which I didn’t get – what a surprise, but I did get a job at the Spotswood General Storehouse – just down the road from Grandma, so I moved in with her during the week and went home on weekends. I thought I was only working to save money to go overseas again, but then I met Noel and my travelling days were over (temporarily) We married in January 1980. We have been married for 25 years now, a fact that both of us find hard to believe – where has the time gone. With no children, I decided to go back to school to gain promotion and develop a career. I went to the Council of Adult Education for my HSC (now VCE I believe) and then went to LaTrobe University to get a degree in Anthropology – which is of course very useful to everyone and took me 9 years to finish while working full time. However, it did serve me well. I was promoted within the Railways (or Vic Rail, or the Met or the Public Transport Authority, and then went to Victoria Police as a Research

Officer – then to their Equal Opportunity Unit – developing policy, writing submission – training police in equity issues. After a while, I also started doing sessional training at Wantirna TAFE (now Swinburne Uni) and then started my own consultancy, providing training to private industry.

Then my body started to complain – I started falling over, I started to develop further muscle weakness, then I had to go back into callipers, and use a scooter to get around and use crutches to stop from falling down. And the fatigue – it is like a blanket coming down on me – I have always been so active and then all of a sudden I can't move. I have post polio syndrome and I am almost the classic case. And worst of all, after trying working from home and going part time, I had to give up work. I fought it tooth and nail – I loved my job. Noel became my carer.

I rested for a good two years and then felt able to start doing more again. So I started to travel with Noel, then doing stand-up comedy. Then I started doing voluntary community work – which has grown and grown. So I will tell you what I am currently doing – I am the Disability Representative on the Tram 109 City of Boroondara Project, the Community Representative on the Road Based Public Transport Advisory Council, a representative on the Client Advisory Council for the Royal Women's Hospital, the co-Chair of the Equal Opportunity Commission Disability Reference Group, the Chair of the Human Services Active Participation Reference Group, on the Board of Disability Media Inc, on the Committee and the newsletter editor of the Eastern Polio Support Group Inc and the Convenor of the Victorian Women with Disabilities Inc, which is almost a fulltime position in itself. I try not to overdo it but it is hard when there is so much to do – and I do enjoy it. I am also helping with the production of a DVD/Video by Polios for Polios to provide information about Polio the effects of Post Polio Syndrome. Not only for Polios, but also for doctors, allied health professionals, family and friends – so there is not inappropriate treatment, but rather appropriate support.