

## Elaine Smythe's Story



My name is Elaine and this is my story. I was born at West Gippsland Hospital in Warragul on the 24th July 1954 weighing 10lb 11ozs, the 7th of 9 children. Mum always said I had been pulled at birth causing my left arm to be placed in a metal sling for 6 weeks as my arm just dangled from the shoulder. Just before Christmas that same year I had a very bad case of the flu but seemed to recover and do the things 5 month baby's do [not much]. As time went by I did most things like talk, sit up and crawl but I wouldn't stand, my leg just buckled under me. Mum said she wasn't concerned until a friend commented when I was about 8 months so Mum took me to the Doctor and the fun began.

By the time I went to the Dr I could stand with help. The test was, I stood on his desk, Mum held my hands, then without warning he grabbed my good leg and lifted it and my weak leg gave way. Diagnosis - dislocated hip; treatment - 6 months in a plaster cast from the waist down both legs to my toes. Mum refused the treatment and was threatened with charges off neglect but nothing ever happened.

Dad took me to a chiropractor when I was 11 months old, he told Dad my leg had stopped growing, after the first treatment my leg was warmer and with the stretchers I started to walk (with the aid of my trusty wooden spade) 11 months later age 22 months. Dad and I travelled hundreds of miles all over Gippsland to see chiropractors, I still see them now. I remember going to Yarra Junction on 14th Feb 1966, the highlight of the day was buying ice creams to get decimal currency for the first time.

Life went on, and off to school. Mum never let me get out of anything at school. I did sport just like the others. I could run in a fashion, with one leg longer than the other it wasn't a pretty sight. I didn't realise I walked with a limp back then and had a go at everything. High school was tuff being the only kid out of 400 students with a disability. What didn't help is that we moved house and I had to change schools at the end of my second year. This school had 600 plus students and being accepting didn't happen easily, I became very rebellious and joined the smokers and got caught smoking behind the pool shed. The next day Mum got me a job at the weaving mill, so ended my schooling at 15.

I grew up on a farm and could drive anything from a very young age. On my 18th birthday I got my licence, then a new job at the Kooweerup hospital as a kitchen hand. It was hard work on my feet all day but I loved it and living away from home for the first time. The job entailed serving the patients their meals on a big metal tray. Balancing soup on a tray when you walk with a limp takes rhythm and practise. One day a patient who was recovering from a hip replacement asked why I walked with a limp. The usual explanation, I was hurt at birth. She told me about her surgeon Mr. John Cloke and suggested I go to see if he could help me. I made an appointment then had the hard job of telling Mum and Dad. Mum hit the roof saying she was told never to let anyone operate on my leg, but they came along anyway. At the appointment I was examined and sent for x-rays, then back for a second consultation all on the same day. Mum cried when we were told I'd had childhood paralyses as she always blamed herself for my disability. The Doctor then said he could shorten my right leg above the knee and I jumped at the chance and had the op 6 months later aged 19 at the Cabrini Hospital. They shortened my femur 1 inch just below the hip, 1 pin that's still there and a K nail that went the length of and inside the bone which was removed a year later. I still have my bone in a jar and the K nail.

The next big thing was using crutches, very hard when it's your weak leg holding you up. I was to spend 6 weeks on them but x-rays showed it wasn't healing well and had to do another 6 weeks on them, after that I could put weight on my leg so another 6 weeks on crutches then 2 walking sticks, then 1 stick until I got my balance back. Imagine my disappointment when I still limped though not as bad as before.

I went on and married, had Simon, Amy and Claire, a divorce, married again to Jeff and 1 more baby. After having Bastian, I was never the same. I thought I had some dreaded illness and would die. I went to the Doctor but no help. Then I heard about PPS and went back to the Doctor but he didn't want to know. I decided to try another Doctor. He listened but said he had never heard of it so I gave up. To my surprise a book about PPS arrived in the mail from that Doctor and a short letter. When I returned the book to him he told me about the polio network where he had gotten the book and information. I read about Polio Victoria at Fairfield, the first I'd ever heard of it, and it changed my life.

My first appointment with Elizabeth Delany was the first assessment I'd ever had. Six months later I had my first KAFO (knee, ankle, and foot orthotic). It took three months to admit I needed it and to accept it. In the end it was the best thing as it totally changed the way I walked, and relieved my knee and back. I used the KAFO for three years then a knee brace to support my hyper extended knee. I still wear one today and use an electric wheelchair for when I have big days out. The hardest part was admitting I needed these things to better my life and look at it as keeping my independence.

However, I missed growing up with the stigma of having polio as I didn't know I'd had it!