

Joy describes her experience using the iron lung.

My first reaction, after I was placed in the iron lung, was one of relief that I did not have to struggle to try to breathe. For a time I was delirious with a very high fever. After the fever subsided, I became more aware of my surroundings and myself. Since I was doing everything while lying in the iron lung – eating, sleeping, getting personal care, visiting with my family - it felt very comfortable and not strange or scary.

I was one of about sixteen people in iron lungs in a ‘Lung Porch’, which was an area set aside that only nursed people using an iron lung during the time they were in the acute, contagious stage. Men, women and children were all crammed together into a relatively small space, so I never felt alone. I was not able to see very much of my surroundings since I could not turn my head, but the human noise of nurses and patients were comforting to me.

Joy describes learning to breathe outside of the iron lung.

When the doctors considered that I was ready, they began opening my iron lung to try to get me to breathe using my diaphragm. There were indications that I still had some active muscles there. However, when my iron lung was opened, it terrified me because all of a sudden, I was not breathing. I had to learn how to breathe on my own, again. It felt like an eternity until they closed up the iron lung. When they started to take me right out of the iron lung to put me onto a bed – I felt very anxious and vulnerable. It took a long time for me to feel safe and comfortable in a bed. I thought I would suddenly stop breathing.

Joy talks about the community at the hospital where she lived.

Since at 11 years old I was the youngest patient in the Lung Porch, the women, some of whom had children of their own, began to look after me as soon as I arrived on the fourth floor at VGH [Vancouver General Hospital] . They ensured I was getting the care I needed, that the staff was gentle with me and that I had something to keep me occupied and happy.

All of us were through the acute stage of polio and moving into the rehabilitative phase. Since the Lung Porch was one large room and we were all out on a bed or up in a chair during the day, we shared everything. My visitors met other patient’s families, and their visitors came to visit me. Special occasions were celebrated by everyone. When one of us reached a milestone in the road to recovery, we were all happy for their achievement. During struggles or setbacks, we tried to console and encourage the one who was experiencing the defeat.

Since I was so young, I was like a sponge - learning things without even knowing it. I know the support I received from my fellow polio survivors was an integral part of my

recovery. Even if it was not a good day for them, they did not want to spoil my day so they made an effort to make me laugh or tell them a story – they did everything they could to keep me happy. I never questioned any of this until I matured and realized what a special gift I had been given.

Joy explains what she would like other respiratory technology users to know about her experiences.

Life is sweet and you have many experiences ahead of you. Do whatever it takes to stay well and active so you can live life to the fullest. The iron lung was exactly what I needed at the time. Now, there is so much new respiratory equipment to choose from, that you are sure to find something that meets your needs and fits your lifestyle, perfectly. However much time it adds to your life – it is worth it.

Joy explains why she believes it is important for her to share her story.

Although a polio epidemic of the 1953 dimension is highly unlikely to develop, something else equally devastating could. I wanted to share my story to pay tribute to and honour those who experienced living through that unique time of history, and to those who gave of their time, energy and money to help. The positive effect of the strength of community – sharing the load – is immeasurable, and the love and support of family and friends can work miracles.

Joy discusses how her experiences challenge common perceptions of wellness and illness.

Some of the general population still has the viewpoint that unless you are completely 'able' with no physical restrictions or have no need for assistive devices, you are not well - or at least you are not 'normal'. If you are not 'normal', then you obviously cannot do so-called normal things, and if you live with a disability that is severe and obvious, then you are 'ill'.

My life, as it does with so many others, disproves this viewpoint. I have attended school, have been employed, have had relationships, travelled and have been able to pursue my interests. Life presents everyone with challenges – some of us have challenges that are a little more complicated than others have. However, with knowledge, technology, awareness and persistence, most of us can accomplish whatever we endeavor to do. Our route to get there may be very different from the norm, but that does not diminish the feeling of accomplishment or the value of the outcome.