



Walk On Through the Rain: A Polio Survivor's Story

Cheryl Peyton

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In August of 1946 the Minnesota State Fair was canceled for only the fourth time in its nearly one hundred-year history. The previous times had been due to war: the Civil War and World War II. In 1946, the Fair failed to open as there was a different kind of war being waged against an unseen, but deadly enemy: poliomyelitis. Polio had become an epidemic across the United States, with disproportionately more cases in the Midwest. Four years earlier, a British nurse known as "Sister" Kenny came from Australia to open a clinic in Minneapolis to help treat the burgeoning number of cases there. Elizabeth Kenny had developed her own unconventional treatments for the paralytic strain. While these treatments that had shown some success in the Outback, they had remained controversial around the world. In that summer of 1946, Jeannie Erickson was not yet two years old and living with her family in Minneapolis when she contracted the virulent strain of polio during an afternoon outing. Days later, when symptoms appeared, Jeannie was rushed to the hospital where she became the youngest patient to enter the Kenny Institute. After spending a couple weeks in an "Iron Lung," Jeannie was moved to a bed in the children's ward with the dire prognosis of permanent paralysis in her legs. This is the story of a little girl's battle against polio; from her first hospitalization, through multiple surgeries and harsh treatments, to be able to walk again and lead a full and satisfying life. In telling Jeannie's story, the book takes a look at life inside the polio wards of hospitals in the 1940s and 1950s where children spent months at a time, able to see their families for only 2 hours a week. The children in the Kenny Institute were fortunate to receive the most effective treatment known; to have the best chance to have the use of their limbs restored. Sister Kenny's techniques eventually led to the development of modern-day physical rehabilitation.

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