

Polio Survivor Presents Positive Perspective on Life After Polio



Greensburg Rotarians were treated to the smiles and humor of Robert 'Robbie' Wilhelm, a survivor of childhood Polio, during this week's club meeting presentation. While acknowledging the tragic effects of the disease on his body and its historically deadly effects worldwide, Wilhelm both optimistically and surprisingly stated that Polio was "the best thing that happened in my life!"

Wilhelm contracted the disease from contaminated drinking water while a toddler in a slum in India. Though he survived, he was left with severely malformed legs and had to resort to crawling to move

about. His biological mother died shortly after childbirth and his biological father had to work constantly just for necessities, so Wilhelm was cared for by the community. Eventually, however, his father chose to put him up for adoption at a Catholic orphanage.

At four years old, Wilhelm was adopted by Gervaise Wilhelm of Minnesota, a 53-year-old who wanted to devote herself to raising children. This event forever changed his life as he suddenly had a family to love him, including two sisters his mother had previously adopted from Russia; access to regular, high-quality healthcare; regular attendance at a Lutheran church to develop his faith; and the opportunity to go to school and participate in sports!

Access to quality healthcare allowed Wilhelm to regain mobility despite his damaged limbs. Through three years of physical therapy, the use of leg braces, and constant encouragement from his mother, he was able to increase his leg strength 400%! Though he still could not run or bike, walking became a normal activity for him, and he was able to use scooters and a hand bike while playing.

Indeed, Wilhelm's physical development opened the way for him to actively engage in his passion for sports. He played baseball from ages 5 to 16 and played golf competitively through his high school team. When he was passed over for the varsity golf team, however, his sports passion took another turn - he began to participate in Wheelchair Basketball. Eventually he would help his team, the Courage Center Junior Rolling Timberwolves, achieve three consecutive National Wheelchair Basketball Association varsity titles. In 2009, at 18 years old, he was part of the American Wheelchair Basketball team that won the Gold Medal at the inaugural Australian Paralympic Youth Games in Melbourne, Australia.

Wilhelm concluded his presentation by pointing out that, had he not contracted Polio, he likely would have remained in the slums in India, poor and uneducated, and died young, as he developed appendicitis at 15 years old—a condition that would have been fatal for him with no access to healthcare. He isn't sure how Polio will affect his life going forward, but Wilhelm has chosen to view his deadly childhood ailment in a positive light - a promising pathway to a better life.

Polio Survivors Face Future Complications with Possibility of Post-Polio Syndrome

(From the CDC: <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Post-Polio-Syndrome-Information-Page>) Post-Polio syndrome (PPS) is a condition that affects 25 to 40% of Polio survivors anywhere from 15 to 40 years after recovery from an initial attack of the Poliomyelitis virus. PPS' most common symptoms include: slowly progressive muscle weakness, fatigue (both general and muscular), decrease in muscle size (muscular atrophy), loss of muscle function, and pain from joint deterioration and increasing skeletal deformities such as curvature of the spine (scoliosis).



PPS is very slowly progressing and the severity of depends on the degree of the residual weakness and disability an individual has after the original Polio attack. People who had only minimal symptoms from the original attack and subsequently develop PPS will most likely experience only mild PPS symptoms. People originally hit hard by the Polio virus, who were left with severe residual weakness, may develop a more severe case of PPS with a greater loss of muscle function, difficulty in swallowing, and more periods of fatigue.

There are currently no effective treatments that stop or reverse PPS symptoms, but there are recommended management strategies, including: non-fatiguing exercises, regular sleep patterns, a well-balanced diet, weight control, use of assistive devices, and taking certain anti-inflammatory medications.

GREENSBURG ROTARY PRESIDENT'S CHAT

Thanks to Jeff for arranging a Mayoral Proclamation for our World Polio Event at The Branch this Thursday. I hope many of you can join us at 11:00 for the proclamation and the awareness event. Additional thanks to Jeff for arranging a great, timely program on Monday: the story of a young Polio survivor who is doing amazing things. His was a very inspirational story.

If you're keeping your 2021-22 Rotary program up-to-date, please note that Rob DeHoff has a new contact email. Please use dehoff22@gmail.com to reach him.

Next week we'll be doing Gracie Maxwell's induction, as well as presenting a new Paul Harris Fellow pin...but you'll have to be there to find out who is receiving it!

Hope to see you at the Community Church at noon Wednesday for the Meals on Wheels service project.

Serve to Change Lives, Jenni

ROTARY CALENDAR

Upcoming Programs:

Oct 25 - Fire Chief Nathan Stoermer

Nov 01 - Membership Drive @ Tree City Brewery, 5:30-7:30p (No Noon Meeting)

Nov 08 - Abby Clark--IN Attorney General Office

Other Important Dates:

Oct 21—World Polio Day Event @ The Branch, 11a-1p (Please sign up to volunteer)

Oct 22 - Fall Bonfire w/ Optimist Club @ the Sefton Home, 6p (Please RSVP)

Oct 24 - World Polio Day

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WORLD POLIO DAY EVENT Oct 21 (11a-1p): Please consider signing up to support our WPD table at the Branch; sign up online: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1bMXD_9IILM1ERERYPDPtjxA0P3fFXUwF_Ysni-i_M/edit#gid=0

FALL BONFIRE w/ Optimist Club @ Sefton Home Oct 22 (6pm): 2535 N S.R. 3, G-burg; **RSVP w/ Alex @ 812-614-7690**

Tree City Brewery (1 Nov) Sign-up: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qMOIzVsBt6QWSpgKanL7J5BqWqnBiQBAYlKnVckKfoc/edit#gid=0>

Rotary Christmas Party, Dec 10—More details to come