

We're Still Here!

By Margaret Hinman

A conservative estimate of the number of polio survivors in the United States who have some long term, lasting effects of the disease is more the 550,000 persons. Even with these numbers, polio is considered an “orphan disease,” a disease that does not receive the press coverage or the money for research that other diseases do. This is, in part, due to the success of the polio vaccines that have resulted in the almost complete elimination of the onset of new cases in this country. In addition, most of us are “mature” citizens and those polio survivors that are younger than the mid-forty’s are usually people who contracted the disease in another country, so the research, in the eyes of some, will go away as we “go away.”

However, we’re still here! We have grown up and matured, many of us going from braces and crutches to throwing them away to having to return to assistive devices as we have aged. We have held jobs, participated in career paths that have taken us places where many people would not think we could go with a disability, have raised families with compassionate children often because of our disability, and have performed activities that defy the expectations of the world around us.

Post-Polio Health International is spearheading an awareness campaign to help draw public attention to our presence in society. In an attempt to support this effort, the Connections and the Colorado Post-Polio Advisory Council are asking all of our polio community to help make our greater communities aware that “We’re Still Here!”

Post-Polio Health International has designated October 11-17 as “We’re Still Here!” week. The focus of this year’s effort is to let the world know that we’re still here by drawing attention to accessibility issues, particularly during that week. PHI is not asking that polio survivors necessarily launch a big, large group campaign to right some oversight or wrong unless a group of us want to organize to do that. Instead, it is asking that each of us be aware of some accessible location that is particularly “friendly” or “unfriendly” and say something about it, either complementing the management of an establishment or calling attention to an unmet need in some establishment. This can be done by starting out the conversation with “I am a polio survivor and I appreciate that . . .” or “I am a polio survivor and I would like to point out to you, or ask you to consider . . .”

So, to help you get your creative thinking caps on and come up with something that you can do, several survivors had come up with some ideas to let people know that “We’re Still Here!”

- Let an establishment know when you appreciate that the bathrooms are especially accessible because the toilets are the right height, the grab bars are placed so they are easy to use and/or, that there is enough room so that a person in a wheel chair can get to the facilities easily.

- Contact the management of an apartment/housing complex, shopping center, and/or business establishment to ask them to not place piles of snow in the handicapped parking spaces this year.
- Ask businesses, or public building management to adjust the automatic door openers/closers so that they allow more time for people to enter, or place the opener buttons where they are reachable from a wheel chair.
- When people who are parking in handicapped parking spaces without a handicapped sticker or license plate, contact the manager to ask them to ask the offender to move.
- Ask management of a business to place handicapped parking closer to the door the next time they re-stripe their parking lot, pointing out that the current handicapped parking is not really accessible when it is “miles away” from the door, particularly in bad weather.
- Point out to businesses or other entities that having handicapped parking without a ramp to the sidewalk is not accessible to those with walkers or wheel chairs.
- Contact the city, county, or state street and highway departments when a walk-light button is available at a corner but cannot be accessed by a person in a wheel chair because the button is too high, or the light post is not accessible because it is set behind a trash container, in a lawn and not on concrete or is surrounded by a curb rather than a ramp.
- Attend a city council meeting or a building planning commission meeting to ask them to be especially aware that following the letter of the ADA requirements may not translate into “true accessibility” and offer some suggestions as to how to make the new construction work in reality.
- Finally, on a personal note, when people hold a door, or carry a package for you, give them a big smile, let them know you are a polio survivor and say a heartfelt “Thank you!”

These are just some ideas that do not take a lot of time or special effort out of our lives and can make a difference to the world. They may not result in immediate changes, or any change at all, but the persons that you contact will remember you, and will become aware that as polio survivors, We're Still Here! And, if change comes because of our concerns, then we can be proud of the fact that we still can make a difference in the world, just like we have throughout our lives!

Editor's note: If you wish to share what you have done for the “We're Still Here!” week, email me at Post-PoloColo@comcast.net. If there are enough responses, the Connections will publish them in the next issue.