

# **Alice (Sandy) Knisely**



I was born November 16, 1926, in Nebraska. I was a published author at the age of 5, when I published my first poem. Polio struck in 1941.

I was entering high school as a freshman. The first day of school I wore my new dress, which was my favorite color: green. I went out to see the new puppies that Brownie, our dog, had. I knelt down to pet them. They were so very cute with their eyes still shut. When I tried to get up, I couldn't stand up. My legs just wouldn't work right and Daddy had to come help me up. I didn't want to be late for first-morning classes, but Mother insisted that I stop by Dr. Amick's clinic before school. I started to not stop by the clinic, but I felt like I had a little fever. As soon as the examination was over the nurse told me to go home. The first day of school was ruined. Little did I know how many days of school would be ruined!!

It was only the second time I saw Mother cry. Something pretty serious Dr. Amick had sad eyes that didn't go with the always-smile he had. Grown-ups were such a puzzle. There was a thing going on that must be truly bad, and I wished they'd just tell me. Maybe it was about my feeling achey sick all over. Then came something called a "spinal tap" for finding out what my sickness was.

Getting a spinal tap was terrible, smashing sensations, kind of like if you took hold of your tummy and your backbone at the same time, then squeezed them together so they almost touched each other inside your body. That was how I thought of it, while pain didn't stop for ages. When it did, breathing was only gasping, along with a thumping headache. I wished to go back into the foggy sleep I'd been in before.

Mother began the crying when Dr. Amick whispered in her ear; she kept it up when he walked over to me and said in a kind of not-really-wanting-to voice: "Sweetie, you are sick with something called infantile paralysis, or poliomyelitis. It's a disease we don't know much about, but we won't let it spread to any one else. The Congers will be quarantined here at the studio for a few weeks."

There were some other things he said, and I couldn't understand. Maybe it was because of my head aching so bad that his voice seemed far away. I didn't remember Daddy hanging that thin, mosquito-net curtain between myself and everyone. When my hand reached out to touch it, there was no curtain.

I wrote in my diary: *"It all seems like a horrible bad dream---my having poliomyelitis. It seems like in a few minutes I'll wake up and Jane Ellen and I will start to school on the first day in our new dresses. But we won't, today is the last day of the first week, and I might not even be a freshmen this semester."*

*"With Mother cutting a little door through the wall into Daddy's darkroom from the pantry off the kitchen, Ned and Jane can get into the Big Room without bothering me. It's tough on Ned, but he pretends it's a secret passageway for an underground railroad. Yesterday he put up a quarantine sign on the doghouse! The puppies are so cute; Jane brings them in one at a time. Their tails are starting to wag. We can't see Daddy. He comes to the back gate and hands Mother mail, papers and groceries. He's staying in Doc's basement, you know. Helen came to talk over the fence and find out from Mother what he should and should not eat. He'll stay away for two weeks; the studio must be locked and there won't be any business. This is the time of year when if we ever have any business we have it now. I could just bite somebody! When kids coming from the corner go by, we hear them call out, "Hold your breath and run like lightning!" Mother says people cross to the other side of the street so they don't come close to us."*

Mother put big bath towels in hot water, as hot as her hands could stand. She wrapped the towels around wherever the pain was, and no more Absorbine, Jr. Thank goodness! Every night Mother got up from her cot and wrung out the hot towels to wrap them again around the aching legs and arms.

Mother said there'd been signs on the front door and back fence warning people to stay away from the contagious area. "Contagious" was a new word, but I didn't think I'd use it after this was all over. Would it be over soon? Time went so slow; I could write in my diary, but not send letters to anyone yet. Relatives and friends sent get-well cards and letters. Ellen wrote the best letters, telling about high school and how swell it was to be a freshman.

I was sent to the Children's Orthopedic Hospital in Lincoln, Nebraska. I rode in the back seat of Doc's car laying on an ironing board. The trip took two days. Having a blanket wrapped around the ironing board helped, but it was still a long, bumpy ride. I kept my mind busy by trying to remember nice things before polio.

After I had been at the hospital for a time, I was finally considered well enough to start "school" in the upstairs ward with other Big Girls and Boys. I signed up for Latin, English, and math in order to be able to stay up with classes back home. They also added art to my schedule. Art was very interesting. My art teacher Mr. Sinclair would not allow us to use erasers. His

explanation was that art was like life. There are no erasers in life; once you make a mistake, it's there for good. You can't erase it. You can try to forget it, pretend it's not there, or you can learn from it and work it into your life.

I was in a wheel chair while in the hospital. In order to get to go home, the doctor's said I had to be able to walk. Physio-therapy was grueling, but beneficial. I was finally able to walk down the hall with the use of my crutches. I was going to go home. I had not been home in almost two months. I would be able to go to school for half a day, but only with the use of my crutches.

Being told I was going home was the happiest moment in my whole life. Later, the only way I could describe it in my diary was a big beautiful window being opened into all my tomorrows. I now knew that I could do almost anything I'd ever dreamed of doing .

Following high school graduation, I attended Nebraska Wesleyan where I met Jim. We dated and he left for Police Action in Korea his sophomore year.

While I attended Nebraska Wesleyan University, I wrote a paper on the hot rag treatment my mother used when I had polio; I had learned that Sister Kenny was using the same treatment on polio patients in Australia at about the same time my mother used it on me.

I taught kindergarten in Loup City for two years, morning sessions of Kindergarten and after noon music for grades 1 thru 7. When Jim returned from the service, we were married in 1949 and lived in Lincoln, NE while he got his Masters at the Univ. of Nebraska, then drove a cab until he was hired by Beatrice Concrete in Beatrice, NE. We lived there for 45 years until Jim retired and then moved to Bella Vista, AR where I drew the plans for a smaller house on a lot we'd purchased 10 years before.

While in Beatrice, I was active in the community theatre, worked at the Beatrice Library, and with Jim's help raised 3 sons and a daughter. We return to Beatrice eve ry month to visit 3 of our kids still there. We love the Ozarks and are active in the Highlands United Methodist Church. I belong to the P.E.O., Welcome Club Book Club, and NW Arkansas Writers' Guild. Jim plays golf and volunteers weekly at the Children's Shelter in Vaughn, AR.

