

*And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*

Hebrews 13:16

Recently I was looking through various pins in my jewelry drawer when I found a very special one that I received in 1954. It is my “Polio Pioneer” pin that I “earned” after participating in what I now believe was the largest public health field trials ever undertaken.



1.8 million children in grades 1-3 in the US, plus more in Canada and Finland, were injected with either a dead-virus polio vaccine developed by Dr. Jonas Salk or with a placebo. At that time I was living in New York State, one of 44 states that hosted the trials in counties where polio was most prevalent. It was funded by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, later known as the March of Dimes, with very little Federal money and political interference!

My 8 year old perspective: I vividly remember how afraid I was of contracting polio. I had a school friend who had one leg shorter than the other because of polio. Images of people in iron lungs were impossible to forget. I couldn't play in the lawn sprinkler because my mother, a nurse, thought that the cold well water might make me more susceptible to contracting polio since doctors didn't know how the virus spread.

Looking back, I don't remember worrying about being a virtual guinea pig. I knew I was helping the doctors find a way to prevent people from getting polio. My only worry was “the shots”! The students in my school would either receive three shots of the real vaccine or three shots of what I referred to as “water.” I can still picture being in a long line of students in the cafeteria, inching forward ever so slowly, towards the person in white, who would give me “the shot.” We waited an entire year to learn the results! I remember so well my reaction when my mother told me...the good news...the vaccine had been approved for use...and the bad news...I had received the “water”. I vividly recall yelling, “Oh, no! That means I have to get 3 more shots!!!” I guess needles back then weren't as refined as needles are today!

My adult perspective: Adults are the true heroes of this story. First of all I think of the scientists who were involved in the years and years of research. When Dr. Salk was asked if he would patent his vaccine, he said no because it didn't belong to him but to all the people.

Next are the parents of those 1.8 million children who had such great faith in the recommendations of the scientists. Can you imagine this ever happening today??? They were willing to possibly sacrifice their children's health to help future generations. Of course, they had strong motivation. Polls in the years following World War II showed that the thing Americans feared most after nuclear war was polio. Parents couldn't do much personally to stop nuclear war, but they could work together with the scientists for the common good of all.

Yet, none of this would have happened if it weren't for the thousands of volunteers who manned the testing sites, who kept detailed notes without the help of computers and calculators! Plus, it never would have even started if it weren't for the millions of dollars donated to the March of Dimes, by individuals and corporations. This vaccine truly belonged to the people.

There was a great need worldwide...and so many people of different backgrounds, religions, and ages stepped up to meet that need. I feel privileged to have played a part, as small as it was, in this effort to free people from the fear of polio.

Fast forward 66 years. Today we again are facing a disease affecting people around the world. Let us pray that people everywhere will see the need to sacrifice their own comfort and pleasure to help stop the spread of Covid-19 and will perhaps enrol in a future trial that would test a vaccine that could possibly benefit all of us.

Bernadette