

# Historic open house offers unique show-and-tell

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Farmington Rotarians Phil Abraham (from left), Rotary District 6380 Governor Elect Barry Fraser, District Polio Chair Ginger Barrons, Carolyn Fraser. Front Row: Bruce Sachs and Dianne Dych-Sachs, Board Chairman and Secretary of Michigan Polio Network.  
*(Photo: Courtesy Botsford Commons)*

A unique open house took place recently at Botsford Commons, in partnership with the Farmington Hills Rotary Club.

The open house highlighted both a historic building that once cared for children with polio as well as Rotary's objective — to eradicate polio. The building that hosted the event was once the Michigan Hospital for Crippled Children and then the Sister Kenny Hospital for children with polio.

More than 95 years have passed since the red brick building was constructed and, like many of its patients before, it is still standing. Staff members working on the interior of the building are just as strong and, just like in years past, they're still making sure residents are cared for and nurtured.

From the 1920s through '50s, during the peak of the polio epidemic, when the building was the Michigan Hospital for Crippled Children, the use of an iron lung was a successful option for treatment.

It was a large, submarine-looking iron cylinder in which suffering patients would lay for hours with very short breaks, assisting their bodies to breathe. The apparatus looked barbaric, as only the patient's head would stick out and there was a mirror above them, making fog every time they exhaled.

At the time, regardless of looks, the iron lung did its job and kept patients alive. The open house was fortunate enough to have an original iron lung on display, driven down from the northern Michigan area, thanks to Farmington Rotarians.

The large iron tube was a sight to see – so heavy and awkward, it stayed outside on the trailer it traveled on. Protected by potential elements with a tent, the iron lung was visited with amazement by dozens of attendees. After asking a guest at the event if they'd ever seen an iron lung before, the man said, "I lived in one for nine months."

Assisted by a scooter, the man and his wife, with a brace on her leg, smiled when they were asked to tell a bit about their lives with polio.

Dych-Sachs lived at the Sister Kenny Hospital for nine months when she was just a little over a year old. She described her mother's sadness for leaving her at the facility and the heartbreak it must have caused the family without her at home.

Back in the '40s and '50s, families didn't talk much about the struggles they were facing. It was private information that was swept under the rug. Since she was diagnosed so young, Dych-Sachs has little memory of the experience.

There is one thing that she still has a vivid memory about: The smell of wet wool. The nurses would use cloth straps to keep me in my crib and later in life it was an odor that brought up emotional memories and I asked my mother about it. The conversation started and I learned more about my early life with polio."

With her was Bruce Sachs, her husband and fellow polio survivor. Bruce grew up outside Marquette. He was also just a year old when he was diagnosed with polio and has little memory of his early struggles. He was in an iron lung for the better part of a year.



Sachs' iron lung was special as it was made from an oil drum. Living in a less populated area during the epidemic, it was more difficult due to the limited access of medical facilities and assistance. Sachs agreed that families during that time spoke of their healthy children, not those who were sick or suffering. After asking Sachs about information or memories he kept, he said, "My medical records only showed my discharge date. It was obvious the doctors and nurses were more concerned about keeping people alive than keeping records."

Though more than a decade separates them in age, Dianne and Bruce have much in common. Their bodies have experienced struggles and left them with physical scars from the past. After both of their spouses died, they began attending a polio support group.

After few meetings, a few emails and a support group restaurant meeting where they sat next to each other, the rest is history. They married in 2008. The Sachs are both very active with the Michigan Polio Network. Bruce is board chairman and Dianne is secretary.

The Sachses and their personal stories are just two of thousands of stories that have passed through the doors of the present day Botsford Commons Senior Living Center. Two other guests that attended the open house have history with the building as well. They were both employees at the time the facility operated as Farmington Nursing Home. One was a nurse and one in activities. They both mentioned how the décor has changed dramatically, but the layout of the building was familiar and still reminded them of the time they spent there more than 30 years ago.

The history of the building runs deep, nearly 100 years. In 1919, the mayor of Detroit, James Couzens, made a charitable gift as a birthday gift to his wife to design and construct an endowment fund for a school. Commissioned to design the school was architect Albert Kahn, a well-known name in the building and design world.

The first of two buildings opened in 1923 and the second in 1926. The school was recognized as a place for housing, education and orthopedic care for crippled children. Hydrotherapy was being researched by Sister Kenny and, thanks to her time and contributions, the facility became known as the Sister Kenny Hospital. With the success of the polio vaccine, the hospital was no longer needed and closed in 1955.

The state of Michigan rented it for children's programming, specifically for those with psychological issues. In 1969, the land and buildings were purchased and became Farmington Nursing Home. Fifteen years later, Botsford Hospital acquired the nursing home and established Botsford Continuing Care Corp. Now, Botsford Commons Senior Living Center is a Beaumont community and still taking care of people who were alive during its early years.



Farmington Rotary Club President Lynn Morgan, District Polio Chair Ginger Barrons, Rotarians Phil Abraham and Lee Barrons showing off the iron lung brought down from Northern Michigan. (Photo: Courtesy Botsford Commons)