

A Short History of the Michigan Polio Network, Inc. 1984-2002

By: Frederick Maynard and Sunny Roller



Mt. Pleasant, Michigan was the site for the first meeting of the Late Effects of Polio Coalition in August of 1984. Health educator, Jean Prout and polio survivor, Josephine Strauss spearheaded this assembly with assistance from other polio survivors that included Charlene Bozarth, Ruth Cornwell and Janice Gross. Representatives from Easter Seals, the March of Dimes, Michigan Department of Public Health, the office of Senate Majority Leader John Engler, Social Security Adminis-



tration and the press were also in attendance.

This was a time in history when many polio survivors were unexpectedly becoming more disabled and were suddenly forced to seek help for new symptoms of pain, weakness and fatigue. Because there was an obvious and troubling abyss of information and assistance, the Coalition began monthly meetings to work out organizational details and maintain pressure on the legislature for support. For polio survivors, this was an opportunity to compare notes on past and present experiences, which proved to be both liberating and fuel for their frustration. The Coalition's goals were to obtain financial support for needed services, to increase awareness and educate the public and medical providers, to encourage further research into the cause of the late effects of polio, and to provide an 800 hotline for information and consultation. Frederick M. Maynard, M.D. a Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation physician at the University of Michigan and one of the nation's foremost authorities on the late effects of polio quickly joined the Coalition, bringing a national perspective on what was known about new medical problems among polio survivors. He also brought Sunny Roller and others from Ann Arbor and southeast Michigan into the group.

The Michigan Kenny Foundation provided their support, expertise and resources as well, and Easter Seals Michigan offered use of their toll-free 800 phone number to field many calls for information and help from polio survivors in Michigan and neighboring states.

Jean Prout's capable leadership took this Coalition through difficult months of defining its identity and purpose and by Spring 1985 a statewide conference was being planned. The Michigan Polio Network (MPN) was established in time to become the official organizer of the October 1985 conference. This conference boasted 375 attendees, which included polio survivors, caregivers, families, and representatives of rehabilitation networks coming together to understand the new dilemma being faced.

Following the conference, Janice Gross turned over MPN leadership to its first elected Chairperson, Charlene Bozarth. Charlene's sensitivity to polio survivors' needs and her organizational skills served to launch the Network into its lasting effectiveness. With assistance of Attorney Roger Gross, an application was submitted for 501c3 status to create our non-profit corporation. In 1986, the chairperson changed from Charlene Bozarth to Jerry Hazel who served as Chairman until May 2002. Jerry aptly led meetings with a booming voice and a can-do spirit.

Charlene, Jerry, Karen Treberg, William Messerol, Sunny Roller, Liina Paasuke, Sue Anderson and several others worked tirelessly to establish support groups throughout the State. Veteran journalist, Frank Lee, brought his literary skill to the Network, establishing the newsletter, Polio Perspectives, which Network members still read today. Through grant funding from the Michigan Department of Public Health and Michigan Kenny Rehab Foundation, Dr. Maynard and Sunny Roller organized a team of rehabilitation professionals to conduct Empowerment Workshops for medical professionals and polio survivors in nine Michigan cities. Later they wrote a training manual, Stay Well! to promote local health and wellness programs for polio survivors, and they gave it to the MPN for publication and distribution. A Post-Polio Library Collection was begun by the MPN in 1987, and was kept in a Burton Township Library for lending throughout the State of Michigan's Library System. It soon became an international resource.

The initial dreams of Jo Strauss, Charlene Bozarth and Janice Gross were realized in the above accomplishments of the MPN during its initial five years and led to many more years of continued successful work to support the educational and service needs of Michigan's polio survivors.