

## Marquette's early generosity reciprocated in unforeseen ways

The story of Bruce E. Sachs, Part I

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These pictures show Bruce E. Sachs in the "trailer unit" iron lung in 1940. (Photo courtesy of the Marquette Regional History Center)

MARQUETTE – One of the largest outbreaks of the polio virus in the Upper Midwest happened in the summer of 1940. Most cases occurred in children, and up to 10% of those patients were in danger from severe respiratory muscle paralysis. Without immediate respiratory assistance, they could stop breathing — permanently. Once it became known that St. Luke's Hospital in Marquette had one iron lung respirator, children with severe polio paralysis were transported to the hospital from all over the Upper Peninsula by all manner of conveyance and during all hours of the day and night. Anxious parents arrived at St. Luke's door, desperate to fight for the life of the child they were tightly embracing.

When overwhelmed hospital staff faced the tragedy of too many children struggling to breathe, they asked local businessman and hospital board member, Max K. Reynolds, if he could build any respirators to supplement their only one. He quickly recruited several maintenance and boatyard workers who came up with two brilliant solutions. First was a wooden crate, sealed with boat wax, connected to a vacuum cleaner which would become known as a “*wooden iron lung*.” One of these is on permanent display at the Marquette Regional History Center.

The second innovation started with a cleaned 50-gallon oil drum with a small sling bed inserted inside it for a younger child whose head could then emerge from a snug rubber collar at one end. A “*trailer unit*” was created by connecting the oil drum to a nearby commercially made iron lung using a hose. This allowed both devices to use a single source of negative pressure suction to expand both children’s chests for air exchange.

One of the children treated at St. Luke’s in August 1940 was a 13-month-old boy from Baraga, Bruce E. Sachs. Bruce was treated in one of the oil drum trailer units and survived. After a whole-hearted life of service, Bruce recently died at age 82. His life story beautifully illustrates how a community’s generosity to those in need can be reciprocated, multiplied in surprising ways.

After being separated for nine long months in the hospital for recovery and rehabilitative therapy for his weakened arms and legs, Bruce finally returned home to his family in Baraga. He worked hard to learn to walk with the help of a left leg brace that extended from his thigh to his foot and a shoe lift, as well as countless hours of therapy from his parents. Recalling his early years, he felt his brother “*resented the attention*” he received while his sister became his “*supporter and helper*.” He also recalled the struggles of “*trying to be normal*.” In a written remembrance he stated “*I grew up in a small town with no handicapped education classes; therefore, I was encouraged to do everything the other children did. I played baseball, went fishing, walked my dog and tried to be as good as I could at everything. My*

*dad taught me all the outdoor activities and I was encouraged to do everything I could, with few restrictions.”*

He enjoyed several summers as a camper at Bay Cliff Health Camp in Big Bay. During the 1940s, Bay Cliff transitioned from a camp for economically disadvantaged children to one for children with a variety of physical disabilities. The majority of campers remained children disabled by polio throughout the 1940s and early 1950s until the widespread use of the Salk vaccine after 1955. Today, the camp still offers intensive therapies and life-enhancing opportunities at no cost to Yooper children who have physical disabilities. (To learn more, visit [www.baycliff.org](http://www.baycliff.org))

Bruce also revisited St. Luke’s Hospital during some summers for rehabilitative surgeries on his most severely weakened left arm and right leg. Then after graduating from high school in Wakefield, MI, he enrolled as a student at Northern Michigan University. He ultimately earned an Elementary Teaching Certificate and a Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership. He also served as an assistant Boy Scout troop leader in Marquette and was awarded the Outstanding Member Award by Alpha Phi Omega, a National Service Fraternity. After college, he began a 42-year teaching career in Livonia, MI, where he rose to leadership positions in curricula and textbook development, as well as serving on the Livonia Educational Association Board.

Next week’s article will discuss Bruce’s later-life advocacy within the Michigan community of polio survivors and his return to Marquette while facing personal struggles with Post-Polio Syndrome.

About the authors: Frederick Maynard is a retired physician specialist in Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation.

Sunny Roller, a polio survivor, is a retired teacher, writer, and educator on post-polio issues.

They both became friends with Bruce through their work with the Michigan Polio Network and Bay Cliff Heath Camp. They both serve on the Board of Directors for Post-Polio Health International.

# Post-polio syndrome a challenge for former Baraga village resident



Pictured are Bruce and Dianne, his second wife. (Photo courtesy of the Marquette Regional History Center)

Last week's article discussed former Baraga resident Bruce E. Sachs, who contracted polio as a 13-month-old boy in August 1940.

Bruce was treated at St. Luke's Hospital in Marquette where he was placed in one of the makeshift iron lungs made from a clean oil drum, developed by Max K. Reynolds.

Later he stayed at Bay Cliff Health Camp where he continued his rehabilitation. Bruce eventually learned to walk and had a prominent teaching career in Livonia.

But as Bruce approached age 60, he began losing strength in his polio-affected limbs. Sudden weakening in his "good" right arm required him to get help from colleagues to continue teaching for another five years until retirement.

He was diagnosed with Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS) which is a late after-effect (at least 20 years following initial infection) of paralytic polio.

PPS is experienced by most polio survivors as they grow older. It can include disabling fatigue, pain and difficulty breathing and/or swallowing. It also induces increased muscle weakness in limbs obviously weakened by the original polio infection, as well as in muscles thought to be spared.

Bruce became an active member of, and attended conferences held by Post-Polio Health International (PHI). PHI is the oldest and largest education and advocacy organization serving worldwide polio survivors. (See <https://post-polio.org/>)

After both retirement and the death of his first wife, Diane, Bruce began his extensive personal study of PPS and other later life effects of polio. Almost immediately, he learned that he needed to change his approach to physical activity from 'Use It or Lose It' to 'Conserve It to Preserve It.' Employing this succinct medical recommendation, he soon chose to go places riding in an electric cart as opposed to walking long distances.

Bruce became involved with his fellow polio survivors. He joined the Southeast Michigan Post-Polio Support Group and found an opportunity to use his educational and leadership skills with the statewide Michigan Polio Network, serving as its chairperson for 12 years. He also met and married Dianne, a fellow polio survivor, who became a co-leader and vibrant partner in all things post-polio.

In 2006, Bay Cliff Health Camp began offering five-day Post-Polio Health and Wellness Retreats as a way of honoring and continuing to serve its older post-polio alumni. Bruce and Dianne (see picture) enthusiastically journeyed back to Bruce's beloved "*old stomping grounds*" in Marquette County.

The couple became key contributors to all the ensuing retreats through the final one in 2021. Many post-polio Yoopers attended these retreats, including well-known locals Cliff Frenn, Paul Churchville,

Paul Blemberg, Donna Boyd, John Parlin and Joan Reynolds Miller, the granddaughter of Max K. Reynolds.

At the 2006 evening fireside program, wide-eyed retreat campers eagerly listened to local historian, Fred Rydholm, who worked at Bay Cliff during the winter of 1940-41.

He shared his personal memories of how children recovering from polio were cared for while accommodated in Bay Cliff's grand, time-honored farmhouse (fondly called 'the Big House').

He recollected that after a violent autumn storm had blown down numerous trees on the property, he was unexpectedly able to industriously gather and stockpile an overabundance of firewood. It almost seemed that Mother Nature had generously provided a gift from the blustery shores of Lake Superior to help the kids heal.

That one storm provided enough wood to easily warm the Big House all winter long for the 30 children who were there for intensive care. Fred's stories overflowed with heartfelt love for the children.

As Fred recalled trimming hair for children during their lengthy stay that long-ago winter, Bruce comically guessed that one of those lucky, good-looking kids must have been him.

Bruce died recently at age 82, more than 80 years after he first contracted polio. Thanks to the work of Max K. Reynolds and many others in the Marquette community who helped Bruce breathe as an infant, he was able to live a long and productive life, giving back immeasurably to people in Michigan's U.P. and influencing innumerable others in so many positive ways.

Editor's note: Frederick Maynard is a retired physician specialist in physical medicine and rehabilitation. Sunny Roller, a polio survivor, is a retired teacher, writer and educator on post-polio issues. They both became friends with Bruce through their work with MPN and Bay Cliff Health Camp. They both serve on the board of directors for PHI.