



Rancho Los Amigos

Post-Polio

Support Group

Newsletter - September 2005

I'm Not Going to Give Up The story of Emma Eivers, polio survivor

By Mary Clarke Atwood and Emma Eivers

Polio survivor Emma Eivers captured everyone's attention as she told the Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support group about her lifelong challenges and determination. Everyone who attended the April 23, 2005 meeting was inspired by the accomplishments of this amazing woman who has severe pulmonary involvement and almost no use of her upper extremities. When Emma was born, the family lived in Mexicali, Mexico, near the California border. Emma's mother was of Italian descent and her father was half German and half Mexican.



Acute Polio

Emma's polio story began May 20, 1956 when she was eleven years old and stricken with bulbar polio in her small hometown. When she developed great difficulty breathing she was lucky there was one iron lung in the town, although it was still in the packing box. Since her father was bilingual he could read the English assembly directions and prepare the iron lung for Emma's use and put her in it. Emma's father moved his office into her room at the hospital, took the back seat out of his car to sleep on and placed it right next to Emma's iron lung so he could care for her, including feeding her through a nasogastric feeding tube. The

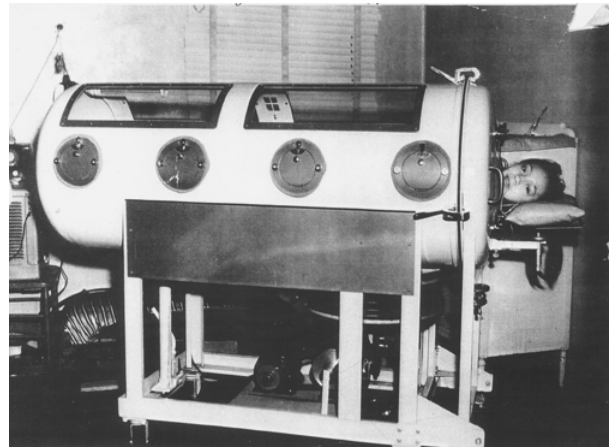
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doctors admitted they did not know how to take care of someone with polio because she was their first severe case.

Emma remained there in the iron lung for five months. Then her father realized that she needed to get to the children's hospital in Mexico City to improve. Mexicana Airlines offered to fly her there on a cargo plane - Emma in the iron lung, along with all the cows, horses, and pigs onboard.



Although Emma still had great difficulty breathing, she was taken out of the iron lung to accommodate other polio patients at the hospital in Mexico City. Emma developed an allergy to the hospital food mixture and her weight declined from 86 pounds to 39 pounds; she was five feet four inches tall at that time and looked like a skeleton. All the doctors told her father that Emma would die. Her father took her to Mexico City to live, not to die. So once again, her father knew he needed to take action quickly.

Hospitalization in California

This time Emma's father went to the Los Angeles area looking for a hospital to admit his frail child. Emma and her father both had visas to enter the United States legally. The eighth hospital he visited, Sister Kenny Hospital in El Monte, finally agreed to admit Emma. So her father returned to Mexico, obtained a cuirass (turtle type shell that assists breathing) for Emma, and flew with her to Los Angeles in 1957. A few months later that hospital closed and Emma was transferred to Los Angeles Children's Hospital.

Emma's father was told the charges for her care at Los Angeles Children's Hospital would be \$80 per day, but he only earned \$120 per month. So her father was reported to Immigration and Naturalization services because he could not pay. They gave him two weeks to take Emma and leave the country. Her father was desperate because he was not going to take her to Mexico. He knew that Emma would die there; the only help for her was in the United States.

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Emma's father arranged for her to be adopted by an older American couple (his half-sister) and told Emma he loved her but she was not going to see him for a while, he was going to disappear. He said, "Don't tell them anything about me, but I'll be back for you." The hospital staff and security were all told to be on the lookout for her father and to contact Immigration as soon as he set foot in the hospital.

About two or three weeks later her father did come to the hospital and security and others came in to arrest him. But her father opened his briefcase, put some papers on the table and said, "You cannot do anything against my daughter. She is an American citizen. She was adopted." Her father moved fast. He said, "She cannot leave this country now because she is legal. Here is her visa and here are her papers. My daughter is a citizen."

Now the hospital staff wondered what they were going to do with Emma. On Valentine's Day 1958 Emma was transferred to Rancho Los Amigos Hospital (often referred to as Rancho) and they put her back into an iron lung almost immediately. Emma's weight was still very low. The Rancho therapists taught her to swallow, to breathe, and to walk. Dr. Donna Barras, also a polio survivor, was Emma's first doctor.

When Emma arrived at Rancho she did not speak a word of English. They would ask her questions like, "What is your mother's maiden name?" She didn't know how to answer. The bedside teachers only spoke English so the only subject Emma could do was math. She could not use her arms to hold up books and she did not have a reading board. She learned English within two months by watching TV and listening to others speak. She learned English fast because it was a matter of survival. After Emma learned English, she was used as a tutor for some of the other patients. This was the beginning of her teaching career. Emma had therapy and her legs became stronger. She learned how to write using her toes and now does many other things with them.

Emma's five years at Rancho also included spinal fusion surgery. In December 1958 she had the first stage of spinal fusion to help correct scoliosis. Emma was put in a body cast, and a halo was attached to her skull with two screws into her forehead and two into the back of her head. The halo was used to pull her up and stretch her back and neck when in traction. When it was time for the spinal fusion

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surgery, an area in the body cast along her spine was removed in order to perform the operation. Emma remained in the body cast for ten months.

Schooling

Although there was a Rancho school, Emma wanted to attend a regular high school. Some of the young candy striper volunteers at the hospital went to the nearby Pius X Catholic High School, so Emma thought she would like to go to the same school. One day Emma asked an attendant to help her get to the school. Emma spoke with the principal and told him she was very interested in coming to that school, she lived at Rancho in the hospital, she could not move her arms, she wrote with her toes, and had no money to pay. Then she asked what she needed to attend that school. The principal said, “When do you want to start?”

Dr. Barras and the head nurse couldn’t believe it when Emma told them she was going to attend Pius X High School so they phoned to verify it. Emma started by attending half days; either Dr. Barras or the head nurse would take turns driving her to school and picking her up. Then the hospital administration said that Emma could not legally attend that high school because the hospital had its own school, so Emma had to stop.

After that Emma was crying every day because she was so unhappy not going to the high school. Finally her girl friends from the school came looking for her. They asked why she stopped coming to school. If it was a matter of transportation they said they would pick her up and bring her back. They said they would take care of her and do anything she needed including going through orientation on how to care for her. Although these friends were only 15 and 16 years old, they followed through and Emma got back to school. Although she had not had real schooling for a long, long time, and had just recently learned English, she was tested and placed immediately into eleventh grade. Emma attended for only half-days that year.

In order to complete her homework and keep up with the class, Emma often had to stay up late at night. She studied and did her homework in an area where the bedpans were stored and the lights were kept on all night. The nurses finally reported what she was doing. A doctor talked with Emma about the problem and said she was not allowed to be doing this. Emma asked the doctor, “How did you

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get to be a doctor? Didn't you ever sit up all night doing your work? What makes you think you are the only one who has the right to do that? Why can't I have the same rights?" The doctor never replied, so from then on Emma was allowed to stay up late to do her homework.

When the senior year began, Emma asked Dr. Barras if she would allow her to attend as a full time student. Dr. Barras asked, "Are you sure you can breathe alright?" Emma said, "Yes."

By then Emma had made many school friends. When the male students asked her where she lived she would answer, "Oh, 7601 East Imperial." She didn't tell them it was a hospital. Emma lived at Rancho from 1958 until 1963 but her only visitors were her high school friends. When her school friends found out Emma was alone and lived at Rancho, they would visit her and also transport her back and forth to school in their cars. They also picked her up to go to football games, dances, and even the prom.

When Emma started going to dances, the nurses would bring clothes from their daughters so she could get dressed up. When she went on her first date, that young man had to go through orientation to learn how to suction her, how to use her breathing machine, how to take care of her. He was a student at a different high school, a volunteer at Rancho, and very willing to learn how to care for Emma. He even told Emma he would teach her how to dance. He and the others were very positive so she thought, OK. She did go to her first dance from Rancho and to the football games. The night shift staff would get her ready to go out in the evening and also get her ready to be picked up for school by 7:30 AM.

During the seven years that Emma was hospitalized she never had a visitor during visiting hours except sometimes once a month on Sunday when her father would cross the border and visit Emma; her parents never came back to live in the United States. Emma's mother was 45 years old when she was born and accustomed to her life in Mexico; her father was working in Mexico, so Emma was really left alone here in this country. Her adoptive parents were elderly and they passed away. So her temporary parents were the doctors and nurses at Rancho.

During Emma's senior year, her friends talked about going to the university in the fall. They asked, "What are you going to do, Emma?" She had no idea; she had

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lived in the hospital for seven years. She wanted to continue her education so she said, “I’m going to the university too.” Emma did not know how she was going to get the money, how she was going to get to the university, or where she was going to live.

One day a high school friend invited Emma to accompany her to the university library. While her friend was busy in the library, Emma walked around and then went into the Administration building. The dean of the college came out and thought Emma was waiting for her and invited her into the office, probably confusing her with someone else. Emma said she was there because she was very interested in the university and wanted to know if she could come there, and asked what she needed to do. Then she added, “I don’t use my arms, and I write with my toes, and I live at the hospital, and I don’t have any money.” She was told she could apply for a scholarship and needed to get everything in by a certain date. Emma took all the papers and went outside to meet her friend who had been looking all over for her. When asked where she had been, Emma replied she was going to be coming to this university too, because she had applied for a scholarship.

College Years

When Emma returned to Rancho a friend told her that she had to take the college entrance exam that Saturday because of application deadlines. So she went to the exam site, paid the five-dollar fee, and asked that the papers be put on the floor for her to write the answers. She was told she needed to take the test when it was given for the disabled because more time was allowed then. But that test would not be given for several months and Emma had a deadline to meet. So they allowed her to take the four-hour exam that day. The test papers were placed on the floor and Emma used her toes to write the answers for every 20-minute section of the test, covering all fields, and all in English, her second language.

Emma returned to her high school classes and two weeks later she was called on the loudspeaker to go to the office. On the way there Emma was terrified and wondered what happened. The principal called her into his office and said, “Congratulations! You got one of the highest scores on the college entrance exam. You are a winner of two full four-year scholarships. They are \$10,000 a year for four years from the University of Southern California (USC) and another from

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Immaculate Heart College (IHC) in Hollywood for \$10,000 a year for four years which also included room and board.”

If Emma went to USC she would have to rent an apartment and she did not know where she would get the money for that. So she chose IHC since they would also provide room and board and she had no other place to live. After living at Rancho for five years, Emma went straight to a college dorm. At that time she was only using a respirator at night and she did walk.

When Emma started college she took 16 units each semester, a full program that included hard classes such as philosophy, history, English, biology, etc. She had to keep at least a B average in order to maintain her scholarship; if she got lower grades she would lose the scholarship. Emma could not fail any courses. She had to stay up late to type papers with her toes and do research.

At that time Emma did not know she could receive money to live on; she had never received assistance from the United States government. So Emma had to work part time during college, taking the bus to the homes of children she was tutoring. She earned her BA degree from IHC in four years, majoring in Spanish, with a minor in French and Philosophy.

Advanced Degrees

After earning her bachelor degree at age 22, once again Emma had no place to live so she ended up living at a Catholic orphanage in Los Angeles and taught the children who lived there. During this period Emma applied for a job as a court interpreter in Los Angeles but was told that position required a Master's degree, so she decided to go back to school.

In order to attend the Master's program classes at California State University Los Angeles, (CSULA) Emma had to travel on three buses in each direction by herself. During this period a social worker told her that she was eligible for financial assistance that would allow her to rent an apartment and hire a helper to assist her.

At CSULA Emma saw an announcement of grant applications to study in France. She applied for and received a grant to cover expenses and tuition. Emma thought this was a wonderful opportunity and chose the University of Montpellier because

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of the moderate climate in that area. One friend said she would accompany her as a helper even though she did not speak French.

Before leaving the United States, Emma researched hospitals in France to find the ones that had respirators. She took two respirators with her, a small portable one, and a larger one that was shipped as cargo and sent to a different airport.

When they arrived at the hotel in Paris at 1:00 a.m. the first challenge was discovering that the local current would not operate Emma's portable breathing machine. Emma had to stay off the breathing machine all night, something she had never done. By the next morning she was totally exhausted and could not breathe. Emma attacked her breathing problem immediately and took a taxi to a hospital that had respirators. The staff began questioning her: What is your name? Where are you from? Emma told them, "I can't talk. I need a respirator." She did not answer any of their questions. Since her helper/friend did not speak any French, she could not be of any help during this crisis.

The hospital staff put Emma on a respirator and she immediately went to sleep because she was so tired. When she finally awoke, they referred to her as the "crazy girl". They said she was crazy to go so far with such severe breathing problems. When they learned that Emma's parents were in Mexico but she had a US passport and was a United States citizen, they couldn't understand.

Emma finally located her other breathing equipment that had been sent as cargo. It had been transferred to the local train station where she and her friend reclaimed it and took the train to Montpellier in the south of France where the university was located.

After arriving at the University of Montpellier, Emma enrolled in seven classes. Emma's helper/friend decided to return to the USA after only one month in France, leaving Emma alone once again. Fortunately her university friends took turns helping her. For meals Emma went to the school cafeteria where friends would feed her. By now, Emma was five feet seven inches tall and her weight had increased to one hundred pounds.

When summer came, everyone left and Emma didn't know what she was going to do. One of her neighbors who was studying law told her not to worry, he would

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take her home with him. He had two sisters and one of them became Emma's helper.

Emma's Immaculate Heart College friends told her this summer in France was a lifetime opportunity to travel and encouraged her to visit other nearby countries while she was there. They even sent her money to buy a car.

Emma's university boyfriend learned how to operate her breathing equipment and then drove them to Italy, Spain, and Switzerland where they remained about one month in each country. They stayed in hostels in each country. Once again she had to adapt her respirator to the different voltages.

Emma studied at the University of Montpellier for one full year and earned a Superior Studies diploma in 19th and 20th Century French Literature. Then she returned to Los Angeles, California, and California State University, Los Angeles. She soon took the examinations to fulfill the requirements to receive her Master's Degree in Latin American Literature.

Since Emma was now fluent in English, Spanish, and French and held a Master's Degree, she applied for a job as a teacher. This time she was told she could not be hired because she would be unable to pass the physical exam; but if she had a PhD degree, she could get a waiver on the physical exam.

Emma went to the University of Southern California (USC), once again applied for and received a scholarship, then enrolled in their doctorate program. Emma passed all the PhD exams but has not yet published her dissertation. While studying there she worked as a teaching assistant with three classes a week.

Emma became totally exhausted from overwork and was admitted to Rancho as a patient once again. But she maintained her commitment to teach three classes at USC; she would leave Rancho and go to teach at USC, and then return to Rancho as a patient. No wonder she was exhausted.

The doctors told Emma that she was killing herself with overwork. One doctor said to her, "Do you know what would happen to Cinderella if she didn't get home by midnight? That is what is going to happen to you if you don't pace yourself." They assigned John Eivers as her health adjustment counselor and told

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Emma he would be talking with her soon.

When Emma first met John Eivers she was in bed with her breathing machine and bed covers up to her neck. He asked if she was paralyzed. She answered, “No. I am a university professor.” He couldn’t believe that by looking at her. As time passed, Emma and John fell in love and were married.

The Real World

With all this teaching experience Emma continued teaching as a career – four years at Compton College and then other local colleges, also teaching medical terminology in Spanish for doctors, nurses, and technicians at St. Francis Medical Center.

Emma and John had a wonderful life together, traveling to many places. Although Emma was told that she only had a 50-50 chance to live through a pregnancy due to her severe breathing problems, she was able to deliver two healthy children.

Unfortunately John’s lungs were under-developed when he was born prematurely in 1941. John developed bronchiectasis and secondary emphysema at an early age. Emma and John were married for eighteen wonderful years. Sadly he died at age 52 when their daughter and son were just ten and eight years old. Emma was left to raise the children by herself. Because her children were young, Emma wanted to remain close to home so she continued her role as teacher by having students of all ages come to her home for tutoring.

Today

Emma continues teaching at USC under the Motivational Institute Program that was designed for children. She was chosen for this position because she is an excellent role model. She is still tutoring at her home seven days a week. She plans to publish her dissertation and receive her PhD degree from USC in the near future. Although her husband and parents have passed away, and her personal and medical challenges continue, Emma is not afraid. She has been a fighter all her life and is sustained by a strong faith in God.

Emma now has two grandchildren ages three years and nine months. Emma is a

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wonderful role model for her children, grandchildren, and others. Her children's friends come to her house and see her teaching, they see her writing with her toes, and they might even see her feed, burp, or diaper a baby – all done by using her feet! She is an inspiration to all who meet her. Emma concluded her moving story with these words, "I have to keep going. I'm not going to give up."

RIGHT: Emma at a recent support group meeting, writing a note with her toes. See the wrist watch on her ankle.

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