



Dr. Jacquelin Perry and Richard Daggett

The Downey Patriot

June 17, 2010



Richard Daggett's new autobiography recounts his remarkably full and enjoyable life as a 60-year resident of Downey and a patient of Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center.

"Not Just Polio: My Life Story," vividly and honestly discusses how Richard overcame a devastating illness to become a world-renowned advocate and resource for individuals with disabilities.

The Rancho Los Amigos Foundation will hold a special reception and book signing at noon on Friday, June 25 at Rancho's Support Services Annex Building Room 1150 to celebrate Richard's life, his 70th birthday and his innumerable contributions to the city and the hospital he loves. Rancho is located at 7601 E. Imperial Highway in Downey.

The community is invited to this event. Both paperback and hard cover copies of Richard's book will be available. All proceeds will benefit The Amigos Fund, which provides vital assistance for Rancho's patients.

Richard's book has much to tell. After his family moved to Downey in 1950, he attended Gallatin Elementary, North Junior High (now Griffiths Middle School) and graduated from Warren High. He grew up in a great community with three siblings and parents who loved him. He was passionate about his piano lessons, playing the saxophone in his junior high school band and singing in the mixed glee club. Richard also enjoyed sports, especially roller skating, bicycling and golf. His family traveled to wonderful places such as Zion, Bryce and Yellowstone National Parks, the high Sierra, and even across the country to North Carolina. In every way, he seemed to have the All-American life.

But on July 17, 1953, Richard awakened with a very stiff neck and back. He was quickly sent to Los Angeles County General Hospital. Three weeks later he entered Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center in a tank respirator (commonly known as an iron lung) as a polio patient. He couldn't move, but otherwise felt healthy.

By Christmas, 1953, he was well enough to visit home for the holidays. He was discharged from Rancho on New Year's Eve, 1954, but soon returned to the hospital for the landmark spinal fusion surgery that made it possible for him to walk again. Richard has been a Rancho outpatient ever since.

“Richard Daggett’s autobiography presents a clear and comprehensive view of his experience with polio,” said legendary Rancho physician Jacquelin Perry, MD in the foreword to the book. “Every episode he reviews is stimulating and told with candor.” Richard spent two years at Rancho to recover enough independent breathing and leg strength sufficient for walking with braces. But his severe scoliosis caused by polio showed no significant gains. So Dr. Perry and Dr. Vernon Nickel successfully stabilized Richard’s spine with a revolutionary spinal fusion procedure that allowed him to sit and stand erect.

“The vision and determination which became evident during this long challenge, were, without a doubt, significant elements which enhanced his effectiveness as an advocate to improve the welfare, comfort and safety of the severely disabled patients who lacked adequate resources,” Dr. Perry said.

Dr. Perry has treated Richard for more than 50 years. Today, the scourge of Post-Polio syndrome affects many of the world’s 5 million polio survivors. Richard and Dr. Perry continue to make a difference for those who have battled polio over all these years.

His parents were well-known throughout the Downey community for their dedication to their community and their son. His father lived to be 101 and his mom lived to be 96. They died within three weeks of one another in 2003. If they would have lived a few more weeks, they would have celebrated their 75th wedding anniversary. Richard credits much of his success in life to their incredible love and support.

The late effects of polio have forced Richard into a wheelchair, but this has only served to inspire him to increase his activities. He was elected President of the Polio Survivors Association in 1980 and has held that position for 30 years. He has also served on the Board of Directors of The Amigos Fund board for three decades and is a member of the Board of Directors of the Rancho Los Amigos Foundation.

The book highlights Richard’s life of service to the disabled community. “As President of the Polio Survivors Association and President of Rancho’s Amigos Fund, Richard is a role model and a lifesaver to countless individuals,” said former Rancho Director of Social Work Greg Thompson. “People come to him in crisis, and with his knowledge of polio, the benefits system, and special caregiver programs, he is able not only to solve problems, but to instill hope. When you look at what he’s done for polio survivors, it’s amazing.”

Richard's book has been very well-received. One reviewer said, "It's wonderful, and of course the photos are priceless. A tribute to Richard's parents, a paean to Rancho Los Amigos, a history of Los Angeles and Southern California in the '50s and '60s, and honest discussion of sexuality, a first-rate description of a tracheotomy and spinal fusion, and how he kept his head through it all."

Another reviewer said, "It is a good read. It is nostalgic for those of us who are old enough to remember the 1950s and great for those who enjoy reading about recent history. The author recalls the events of his life clearly and with absolute candor."

Richard has given nearly 10,000 volunteer hours to Rancho Los Amigos, making him one of the top 10 volunteers in the 122-year history of the hospital.

"He was Volunteer of the Year for Rancho in 1988, but as far as I'm concerned, he could be Volunteer of the Year every year," said Rancho's Director of Volunteer Services Debbie Tomlinson. In 2006, Rancho awarded Richard its highest honor, The Amistad Award.

In addition to his work at Rancho and in his volunteer organizations, Richard is an active journalist who has written extensively on disability and the human condition. He has appeared in several film and television documentaries about polio, and was featured in a noted Huell Howser video on the history of Rancho.

Richard has authored several pieces of legislation benefiting those with severe disability. "He learned from his parents how to overcome barriers caused by his disabling condition, and he continues to overcome every barrier he encounters to be a powerful advocate for other individuals with disabling illnesses and injuries," said Rancho Chief Executive Officer Jorge Orozco.

Richard is a longtime member of the United Methodist Church in Downey, where he is a lay speaker. He is also a member of the Downey Coordinating Council. A brilliant landscape photographer, he serves as an instructor in the Don Knabe Pediatric Photography program at Rancho. He still enjoys music and is a major history buff.

"Richard is a true inspiration to all of us," said world-renowned Rancho artist Steve Clay. "He is one of the kindest, most gentle, most loving and most talented people I have ever met."

"I just think we're put on this earth to help one another," Richard said. "If I can help improve the life of even one person, then I'm enriched also...and I think that's what we're here for."

Published: June 17, 2010 - Volume 9 - Issue 9

© thedowneypatriot.com 2010