

Life Interrupted

By Henry Holland

One of 1999's better films was "Girl, Interrupted." It is a story based on the autobiographical book of the same title. Susanna Kaysen is the author of the book. The story is about an eighteen-year-old 1960's high school graduate whose future is uncertain. Her name is Susanna. During the 1960s, she attempts suicide and is hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital for eighteen months on an adolescent female ward. Throughout the film, the viewer learns about the various difficulties that Susanna and the other young patients have experienced. There is tragedy, adventure, and triumph. Ultimately, Susanna improves and gets on with her life. The film may reach the viewer at many levels.

For me, it reminded me of an event that definitely "interrupted" my life fifty years ago. I have recently realized that the calendar for this year is identical to 1950. On Sunday, September 17, 1950, I became ill with a gastrointestinal disorder which four days later was diagnosed as poliomyelitis. Subsequently on Saturday, September 23, I was admitted to the Medical College of Virginia Hospital on the ninth floor, south wing, polio isolation ward. I will not belabor you with any more detail other than to say that this event "interrupted" my life.

This fifty year interruption anniversary did provoke me to do some research on what happened in Virginia in regard to polio in 1950. I wrote about the Virginia Polio Epidemic of 1950 in the last issue of the *Deja View*. I learned that there were more polio cases in Virginia in 1950 (1200 reported cases) than any

other year on record. I learned that I was the thirty-seventh case out of fifty-two cases reported in Richmond that year. Wythe County's 184 cases was the largest number for any locality in Virginia ever. All this is to say that I had plenty of company with others whose lives were "interrupted." That was of little comfort to me at the time. After returning to school a year later, what I remember is that I was the only kid in my school wearing leather and steel. I was easy to spot. Like most of you, I did everything I could to be normal, fit in, and be less conspicuous. I probably succeeded better than I think.

Despite many respiratory problems, my life went relatively well for forty years. In mid 1990, a second interruption entered my life. This one was not acute, but more insidious and more mysterious. After attending my first meeting of the Central Virginia Post-Polio Support Group in September 1991, I knew that this second interruption was called Post-Polio Syndrome. Once again, I learned that I had plenty of company. This time, I found considerable comfort in the shared experience that I found in this special group.

This second life interruption has a wide assortment of symptoms and problems. Within our support group, I found that I was not alone in this more lasting life interruption. If you have been dealing with PPS in a vacuum and feel like you are alone in this daily struggle, I invite you to come to some of our meetings. If you are physically unable to get to our meetings, I invite you to call one of our officers whose phone numbers are published in every *Deja View*. In the

Life Interrupted - continued

near future, there are plans to publish the E-mail addresses of our members who have computers and have access to the Internet. The Internet is essentially barrier free. Many folks with PPS are able to communicate with one another via E-mail, PPS list services, instant messages, and chat rooms. If you feel that computer literacy is beyond your capability, many of our members would be delighted to help you get started. Just let us know at one of our meetings, by a phone call, or letter.

By the time you read this issue of the *Deja View*, hopefully you have read the three-part feature article in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* about polio and PPS that began on Sunday, September 24. This series of articles was scheduled to revisit Virginia's largest polio outbreak fifty years ago and the

difficulties faced today by folks with Post-Polio Syndrome. Staff writer William McKelway was the author of this feature article. I am indebted to McKelway for his assistance in my own research on the Virginia Polio Epidemic of 1950. I first met with him in mid June and he became interested in this story of polio and PPS. To put it bluntly, I think he became consumed with this story, our story. I hope you found it to be of value.

Earlier this month, I completed six years of being your president. I have been greatly blessed and have enjoyed working with many wonderful people in our group. Over these six years, I have been privileged to meet hundreds of polio survivors, literally from around the world. This type of "interruption" has been a source of personal inspiration, encouragement, and hope. I thank you all.