

## Post-Polio Thoughts

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### COME HEAR THE MUSIC PLAY

The words kept running through my mind: "What good is sitting alone in your room?" Da dah da dah dah dah. Yes. That song from *Cabaret*. What was I thinking? Then it hit me. Exactly! How many polio survivors have said similar words as they explain their interest in a very special kind of volunteering—working with children.

Take Jan, a retired realtor who has struggled with post-polio issues for years. Jan works with two-and-three-year-olds at a Florida child development center. Once a week she spends half a day at the center dealing with English-as-a-Second-Language children, in small groups or individually.

She's experienced amazing breakthroughs. Imagine this: "One day, Diego and I had a wooden puzzle with cutout places in which to insert seven different dinosaurs," Jan says. "Diego loves dinosaurs. A little girl ran over and asked what Diego was doing. To my surprise, he took each piece out of the puzzle, lined up the dinosaurs along the edge of the table, and then, pointing carefully, said, 'This is a dinosaur,' seven times, once for each dinosaur. This was the first time Diego ever spoke, in English or in Spanish, at school or at home. What an amazing moment that was!"

There are so many ways to assist teachers. In Colorado, Anna and her gentle chocolate Labrador both became certified to help elementary children improve their reading skills. The kids loved reading to Koko in the classroom. Again, there was that special child, this time little Angie, who had never been heard to speak in school. Never, that is, until finally one morning, when she saw the Lab trotting in for their session, she shouted, "There's Koko! There's Koko!" She rushed over to her pal and began chattering as she had never done before. Had a polio survivor and her affable dog brought new life to Angie?

Not every post-polio volunteer works in schools, however. Mentors often have a different goal. Here in the Omaha Boys and Girls Club, mentors work with students on character and leadership development, as well as on effective communication. Mentors and mentees get together around pizza to discover what individuals might have in common. If a mentor is good at photography, and a Club member finds that fascinating, for instance, it's a match.

"We have a shortage of mentors," says the Club's Regina. "We have so many excellent ones—people who are patient and have outgoing personalities. Good communicators. We just don't have enough."

All their applicants go through background checks and three hours of training. Mentors devote one hour a week for a minimum of eight months with their mentees (all in the 6 to 18 age group) in order to establish a viable relationship. They meet only at the Club, for the safety of both individuals. Other mentoring organizations may have different guidelines.

In yet another program, Betty mentors elementary students from affluent homes. "The emphasis is on academic success," she says. "These are kids who are not keeping up with their peers." Once a week they meet, one on one, in locations set up by the family. "Relationship is extremely important," says Betty. "Kids thrive on the extra individual attention and respond beautifully."

O.K., so a lot of polio survivors aren't simply sitting at home watching the dust gather. We're busy folks, often driven, they tell us. Still, many of us have time for one more gig. As Betty says, "I want to give back instead of just taking. Makes me feel better about myself."

And helping kids find their way—well that's music to our polio-survivor ears, isn't it.

Wanna hum along?

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Source: Post-Polio Health International ([www.post-polio.org](http://www.post-polio.org))