

Man in iron lung discovers Rotary

One might think a man living with polio in an iron lung would know about Rotary. But it wasn't until Paul Alexander had a business meeting with a member in Duncanville, Texas, in 2015 that he learned Rotary fights to eradicate the very disease that left him almost completely paralyzed.

"I was completely blown away by the idea. For all these years, I didn't know the work they were doing," says Alexander, a practicing attorney in Dallas. "It's such a perfect fit for me."

Alexander contracted polio during a major U.S. outbreak of the disease in July 1952 when he was six years old, and almost died in the hospital before a doctor noticed he wasn't breathing and rushed him into an iron lung, an airtight metal tank that encloses all of the body except the head and uses regulated changes in air pressure to force the lungs to inhale and exhale. Alexander is only one of two people in the world today still using an iron lung to assist his paralytic polio. The need for the 800-pound machines declined dramatically after the polio vaccine became widely available in the early 1960s.

Freed from the lung

For 10 years, Alexander never left the device or his house. But then he had a breakthrough, teaching himself to breathe on his own by forcing air into his lungs. That allowed him to get around in a wheelchair for up to eight hours.

"The first day I was outside the house was extraordinary. It was a 100 percent improvement," he recalls.

Determined to go to college, he moved onto campus and with the help of a nursing assistant attended classes, earning a degree from the University of Texas. He eventually went on to earn a law degree, passed the bar, and practices civil and criminal law.

He has a computer keyboard and a touchtone phone by his head which he can manipulate with a plastic stick held in his mouth. When he goes to court for a case, he has assistants who help him. He's travelled farther from his home on rare occasions. The iron lung, which has wheels, is shipped to meet him at his destination.

His father was president of a Dallas Rotary club in the 1960s, but Alexander says he doesn't remember it. His introduction to Rotary began when he met Duncanville member Alexander Peralta. Peralta told the Rotary District 5810 governor, Bill Dendy, who immediately decided Alexander would be the perfect subject of a video his wife was making on polio eradication. Alexander agreed, and a film crew from the district's e-club came out to shoot the interview.

"I visited him weekly after that," Dendy says. "One day, I said to him, 'Paul, you could be a contributing member of Rotary.' He asked me how that would be possible. And I told him with an e-club, which meets online, it would be very possible."

In October 2015, Alexander became a member of the Rotary E-Club of District 5810 during an induction ceremony held in his home, attended by Rotary's President Gary C.K. Huang through an online connection. Alexander is writing a book about his experience and wants to be an ambassador for Rotary promoting the benefits of eradicating polio.

Since joining Rotary, he's become a popular speaker in the Dallas Rotary community. He's already addressed two large gatherings and is scheduled to speak at the next district conference. The Waxahachie Rotary Club, which builds wheelchair ramps as a project, built him a new one when they heard he transports his iron lung to the hospital or for longer trips.

"It means so much to me to belong to this organization," Alexander said during a phone call to his home recently. "I'm having a great time and staying awake at night thinking of ideas. So many people have come into my life. I never knew there were so many caring people out there."

Paul has outlived his parents and elder brother Nick and many old friends and he is very pleased that in 2020 the world is now 99.9% polio free. However, he is very mindful that most people have largely forgotten about the terror of polio. Until it is totally eradicated, we must NOT forget!

Adapted from an article by Arnold R. Grahl in 2015 and an article in The Guardian, 2020

Tom Hunt

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