

WE'RE STILL HERE! 2021

This past October marked PHI's 15th annual awareness campaign. For many, the past couple of years have been challenging, as the pandemic upset our normal routines. PHI heard from many of you seeking advice on exercise and nutrition in order to offset the effects of living a less active lifestyle.

This "WE'RE STILL HERE!" campaign, PHI asked to hear from those of you who had found ways to break out of your pandemic ruts and stay active and healthy. We asked you to submit a photograph and a descriptive paragraph or two about changes you've made to your routine or diet in order to lead healthier, more balanced lives. We thank all of those who chose to share their experiences with us. Following are the winning entries as decided by our panel of judges.

GRAND PRIZE WINNER

*Corina Zalace,
Niceville, Florida*



Adapt! You must adapt! It is something I had to learn over the past 71 years since contracting polio at the age of two. I became a master at adapting, usually enjoying the challenge. Then the COVID pandemic hit, and my very active lifestyle came to a screeching halt. I had been confined to a wheelchair since 1986 because of my childhood polio, but that had never stopped me from being out and about, driving my lift-equipped van with hand controls everywhere there were roads—and some places where there were just dirt trails.

But no more. My classes closed, and I had to give up my college studies to become a licensed art therapist. I was teaching art to adults and children. That had to stop. COVID definitely put a damper on my life.

So, I had to go back—back to adapting to new situations. Spending hours at home away from friends and other people was challenging. My brain went back into adapting mode again. I began talking

more on the phone with family and friends, which always brought joy to my heart. Yet, that did not fill all the time I had to spend at home.

I still had so much free time at home. I had to do something. First, I saw my stacks of books around the house, waiting to be read. So, I began reading, and read until I had finished them all over the course of the next year. I also love to puzzle. And I love working on my art. To be able to draw and paint became a huge emotional release for me.

My biggest advantage every day was that I had married my best friend. We spent hours every day helping each other with our projects, planning new ones, reading together or just enjoying each other's company. As for exercise, taking my service dog out and pushing my wheelchair outside in the fresh air boosted my spirits. Yes, it was a challenging time, but I am so grateful how polio in my early years taught me to enjoy being an adaptable and flexible person.

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FIRST RUNNER-UP

Sunita Dodani, MD, Norfolk, Virginia

I am a physician cardiologist and polio survivor. I contracted polio in all four limbs at the age of two. Today, I am 51 years old and have a beautiful life and family—a loving husband and a 16-year-old son. I faced many challenges growing up with polio in Pakistan. Yes, I was born in Pakistan, and we were minorities. Pakistan is a Muslim country and raising a Hindu woman with a disability is next to impossible. However, even though my family pressured my parents to give me to the orphanage, my parents provided me with extensive physiotherapy—day and night. My muscle strength in my arms improved, and after four years, I started to wear surgical braces for mobility and started walking slowly. Since then, these braces have been part of my body.

Becoming a cardiologist and a cardiovascular researcher was my mom's wish. She always told me that what I had gone through—living life with polio in a country where there is no respect for women—would better help me understand patients' pain and perform cutting-edge scientific research.

COVID hit us last year, and it has been more than 18 months now that we healthcare providers have been working day and night in hospitals. I am the founding director of a healthcare institute where work has tripled due to the COVID pandemic. I am responsible for running the institute and taking care of COVID-related work on patients. This has been very stressful, and on top of that, social distancing further exacerbated and limited my exercise.

To keep healthy, I swam for 30 minutes at least four days a week. Social distancing and the closure of fitness centers has reduced my mobility. It's been 18 months since I have been to a fitness center and swam. However, as we say, where there's a will, there's a way.

Since last year, I have started doing yoga every day for 30 minutes. The beauty of yoga is that it can be done on a bed or in a chair. These yoga breathing and muscle strengthening exercises are easy for polio survivors to relax, alleviate COVID-related anxiety and stay calm during this unprecedented time. Further, being a physician cardiologist myself, I've always paid attention to what I eat, as every increase in weight causes a significant burden on our joints.

My message to all my fellow polio survivors is to stay active and move muscles by spending at least 30 minutes a day on yoga. There are tons of chair yoga exercises on the internet. Secondly, to remain safe, please get the vaccination if you have not already. This is important. Last but not least, eat a healthy, small amount and avoid unnecessary stress. Everything happens for a reason. This COVID has come. It will go, too. Just trust yourself and be happy, no matter whatever the situation is.



SECOND RUNNER-UP

Peggy Thornburg, Athens, Georgia

I contracted polio at four months of age—14 months before the vaccine was available. I was treated at Breckenridge Hospital in Austin, Texas. I was reported to be the youngest child to survive polio that month. I was treated with Sister Kenny hot packs. Luckily, polio didn't affect my lungs, and I grew up singing in the schools I attended over the years.

Fast forward to the COVID epidemic, which put a stop to singing for a while. After a short hiatus, I went back to singing again through Zoom with my four groups here in Athens, Georgia—Athens Choral Society, Athens Symphony Chorus, Meridian Women Chorus and Chapelwood Choir. Those days were very enriching during the pandemic year. It was like vocal aerobics.

We videotaped the sessions for the community at large, who used to hear us perform quarterly at Hodgson Hall on the campus of University of Georgia. Many let us know how enriching these Zoom performances became for them during the year. Singing is excellent for the lungs. Endorphins go through the body, which leads to strengthening the whole body when done every day.

In August of 2015, I was diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer. With this came months of weight loss because my peritoneal area prevented me from eating. After chemo and a grueling de-bulking surgery to remove some cancer, I had gotten down to 125 lbs.

Recently, after years of chemo, CTS and blood draws, I found I had gained weight and had to get the weight off. I started a low-carb, high-protein diet with lots of roasted and sautéed veggies. I lost 10 pounds. I'm still working on this. It is a lifetime struggle. Cutting out white sugar was essential for me. If I eat rice with veggies, I use brown rice. It can be boring but must be done.

I use a scooter now after years of walking with crutches, though I still use crutches in my home. I can now get out of a chair easier. Weight is my enemy; I must not let it get the upper hand. Life is easier now.

THIRD RUNNER-UP

Dianne Wall, Winter Springs, Florida

I was given a love and talent for music and became a registered music therapist, as well as a professional singer. I have always used my music therapy to exercise/stretch, as well as keep my spirits up, but during the pandemic, I used my music to stay healthy and calm.

I knew I needed to stay engaged with people, even when we were isolating, so I used technology to stay connected. I have been the director of many choirs during the years, but during this pandemic, I had my first virtual choir with my church's children's choir that I was directing. Since we could not meet in person, I learned how to use Zoom and another app called Loom. We also used FaceTime.

I recorded MP3s and sent them to the children's parents. Our big accomplishment was a singing Christmas card that was played on the church's YouTube channel. I had each one record themselves using their cellphones and send me their MP3 recording. I used my recording software to lay down each recording as a track and blended them all together. It took many hours, but it was a labor of love.

Staying healthy is an attitude of gratitude for me, and thanks to technology, I was able to practice that immensely.

FOURTH RUNNER-UP

Brenda Ferguson, Tallmadge, Ohio

One of the most important things in my daily life is to find a way to bring sunshine into another person's life. So, I journeyed into the world of learning how to craft homemade greeting cards to send to those downhearted to help lift them out of the feeling of hopelessness COVID-19 has ingrained in them. I began by immersing myself in a group of five very close friends (all acquaintances from church) to learn the basics. Then, each day I would address and mail several cards—not only to people I knew well, but especially to those that I didn't. It has been such a joy to hop on my scooter and go to the mailbox daily and drop in a handful of cards!



Especially hard hit were those in poor health, people all alone, and the elderly who seemed to not quite understand what the illness was all about. I have to admit, a couple of times, I reminisced about how I felt being in isolation when stricken with polio at age three and being unable to see or talk to my family. Everyone has suffered greatly in one way or another the past couple of years from the pandemic, and even the smallest thing we can do to lift one another up is so important.

Another joy of mine is to stay in touch with others and make several calls daily, especially to those housebound, to cheer them up. I always end the call with how important it is to “keep looking up” and encourage them to believe that better days are ahead. We will see a big “rainbow,” prayerfully one day soon. Let's keep smiling ... it may be tough some days, but we will get through this! ■