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## SHERRY HURST:

### "I Plan to Celebrate My 100th Birthday!"

Sherry Hurst, Lubbock, Texas

Okay. Here's what I've come to realize about everything that has happened regarding my health since late last year. I went to see a pulmonologist about what I could do in order to be able to travel.



I was having to spend 16 to 18 hours a day in the "tank" (my iron lung), and I could manage about 5 to 6 hours in my wheelchair. I try to stay as active as possible in advocacy for elder, education, homeless and, of course, disability issues.

[Sherry contracted bulbar polio in 1955 at age 3. See sidebar story, below.]

Of course, the immediate question about trach and ventilator came up – to which I said a resounding and emphatic, "NO WAY!" When asked, "Why not?" I gave some lame excuse about pseudomonas – the reliable and unarguable comeback. [Pseudomonas is a bacteria that can cause severe infection including pneumonia.]

However, the truth is something quite different.

You see, growing up, "trach" was something that only entered last-minute, last-ditch efforts as a "lifesaving Hail Mary" in the medical sense. At least that's the message I picked up as a kid and carried with me into and throughout my adult years.

Trach also carried the connotation of "failure" with it. I'm not sure failure at or about what. It really didn't matter. What did matter, above all else, was not failing! I'm sure there are some other driven polio survivors out there nodding and smiling just a bit.

On December 18, I got very ill and ended up in the intensive care unit intubated with kidney stones in both kidneys requiring a surgical procedure. Next, I developed double pneumonia severely damaging both lungs and requiring full-time ventilator support. I, of course, fought stubbornly to get myself to where I could come home and get back to my beloved tank, convinced everything would be okay.

### *About Sherry*

**Sherry contracted polio in 1955** when she was three years old in Abilene, Texas. A year later, she was transferred to the Gonzales Warm Springs, a rehabilitation hospital, where she spent the next two years "being stretched, fitted for equipment and taught how to function with all the new contraptions used for coloring, eating, etc."

She had used an iron lung for two months, was gradually weaned to a rocking bed and then a regular bed with no breathing assistance. However at Gonzales, she developed pneumonia and was placed back in the iron lung. Unable to handle respiratory cases, Gonzales transferred her to Houston to what became TIRR Memorial Hermann Rehabilitation Hospital.

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By mid-January, I was moved to a specialty hospital to continue my stubborn attempts, but after two or three weeks and no improvement, I was forced to choose: God-awful permanent oral intubation living in a skilled nursing facility, a nice euphemism for a nursing home/warehouse OR go ahead with trach and vent, return home with Medicare



providing ventilator, monthly supplies, respiratory therapist, hospital bed with alternating pressure mattress to prevent bedsores and other supports as needed. These combined with the Medicaid Waiver program I'm on that provides attendant care made the choice fairly obvious.

So on February 1, I got my tracheostomy, and my life changed forever.

However, much to my surprise, the change has been a blessing! I'm actually quite amazed at how easily I've made the switch to trach and full-time vent (Philips Respironics Trilogy100). It has given my attendant and me the freedom and ability to travel, something we really couldn't do before. I was able to replace my old 1994 van with an almost-new fully accessible van, and I replaced my 24-year old wheelchair with a snazzy new model.

The thing my attendant and I miss is the ability to hear my voice whenever I speak without having to deflate the trach cuff and then inserting the speaking valve, which I really don't need because can be

## About Sherry

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"My parents realized early on that my mind was going to be my most valuable asset in life." She started first grade via an intercom system set up by the phone company. "I began my academic career in a one-room schoolhouse – our kitchen," she said.

Starting the third grade in Austin, where her father had been transferred for work, she entered a pilot program for elementary students with various physical disabilities. "This was great," she recalled. "I could go to school, be with other kids and still have physical therapy and a rest in the afternoon."

By fourth grade, she was able to "mainstream" in some classes, and then her father was transferred to Texas City, where there were no special programs. "We worked out a deal with the schools that I could attend regular classes with no special considerations as long as my presence wasn't disruptive. I did wonderfully. I came home exhausted the first couple of weeks, but mainstream class education was the best thing that ever happened to me."



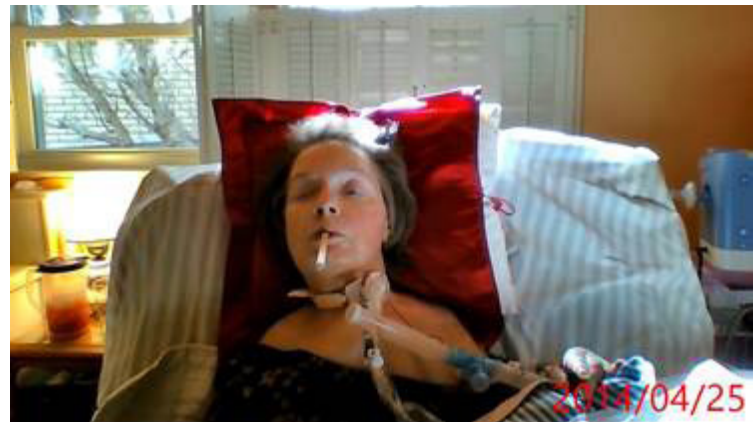
Sherry in her "tank."

heard perfectly fine by just deflating the cuff and allowing air to flow over my vocal cords. Either way, I can talk for about 20 to 30 minutes before having to stop for suctioning.

Trying to put into words how something Satan was trying to use to defeat me and make me question my faith is very difficult. I do know that God turned this around and provided not only for my

needs (better ventilation and health), but he also gave me my wants at the same time. Now I can travel, enjoy my new wheelchair for more than four to six hours a day, and, of course, our new car.

So, God is in control and life is fantastic! I have a lot of living to do. I told y'all I plan to celebrate my 100th birthday! ■



*Sherry's attendant since 1998, Nicky Sachchabutra (right), with Sherry's late mother.*

In addition to the stimulation of healthy competition and socialization, "I learned that I could get along in a world structured for the able-bodied and be successful." From then on, Sherry attended public schools in Texas and New Mexico. During this time, both Sherry's parents worked and she had a number of attendants, some of whom doubled as housekeepers. When she was a junior in high school a young woman who was starting business school was employed as an attendant in exchange for room and board.

She and Sherry became fast friends, and in 1970, both entered Texas Tech University as freshmen. "We were instrumental in the ramping of much of the campus." Sherry earned a bachelor's degree in psychology in four years and returned as a graduate student to earn a teaching certificate in secondary education and later, as a master's candidate in English.

Sherry has been a volunteer in the Lubbock School District and chairman of the volunteer program for eight elementary schools. She was nominated by the Lubbock School District as volunteer of the year and was one of 12 semi-finalists nationwide. ■