

## **THE FDR BOND: HOW A LITTLE GIRL'S FRIENDSHIP WITH AMERICA'S MOST FAMOUS POLIO PATIENT CHANGED HER FOREVER**

*Anne K. Gross, PhD*

On the evening of November 3, 1928, three year old Carol Rosenstiel, her braces hidden under her pant trousers, her wooden crutches digging into her underarms, stood on the platform of Grand Central Terminal in New York City, a huge suitcase by her side. Her mother, Evelyn, holding her three month old son, bent down, straightened the collar on her daughter's coat, and kissed her good-bye. Her father, Iz, gathered Carol into his arms and held her tightly. Crying, Carol clung to Iz as he handed her over to her Aunt Mary, who had volunteered to accompany her, and the two boarded the train. Their destination: Warm Springs, Georgia, home to the nationally renowned polio treatment center founded by Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Carol was my mother, who contracted polio in 1927 at the age of two, leaving her permanently paralyzed from the waist down. Although Warm Springs had served as a polio rehabilitation center for less than two years at the time of Carol's visit, its history of healing went back for decades. The first inhabitants were Native Americans, who believed a great spirit lived in the earth, stoking the fires that warmed the springs and healed their battle wounds.

Most people who came to Warm Springs had nothing but fond memories: the feeling of freedom that came from swimming in the warm water pools, the sense of warmth and acceptance for who they were, and the famous Thanksgiving dinners, which FDR graced with his presence every year. But for Carol, her most cherished memories were of her special friendship with FDR, who helped shape her personality and remained a source of inspiration to her throughout her life.

Around the time Aunt Mary and my mother arrived at Warm Springs, Roosevelt won the governorship of New York. A few days later, on November 8, he traveled to Georgia where nearly a thousand townspeople greeted him at the train depot. As his train pulled into the station, he stood on the platform, both arms clenching the railings, as a sea of onlookers proudly welcomed him to his home away from home. Although his visits always engendered excitement, as the newly elected governor, Roosevelt embodied the notion that a disability is an obstacle than can be overcome, fueling the optimism that engulfed Warm Springs.

Carol met FDR in the pools a few days later. She recounted their meeting, handed down as family legend by Aunt Mary, in a series of journals she wrote in the decade before her death in 1985:

Our exercise tables were next to each other and, being the new girl in town, he greeted me with a warm hello and asked my name. I responded by saying "Carol" adding "What's your name?" To which he answered "Uncle Frank."

From that first encounter in the pool, Carol was immediately drawn to FDR's infectious cheerfulness, as he greeted all of the patients with genuine care and interest. Yet what struck her most was here was a man who seemed to not feel a hint of self-consciousness about his impairment. As a result she found her own spirits were lifted.

Carol's interaction with FDR that day was life-changing, as it stood in stark contrast to how she'd been treated back home. In the 1920s, society viewed polio as a shameful thing, and her parents, who knew of no one else who was stricken with the virus, felt ashamed and deficient as a result of having a daughter who couldn't walk. Devastated by the thought of raising a disabled child at a time when society viewed people with disabilities as outcasts, Evelyn spent days on end secluded in her room, leaving the care of her daughter to hired help. Thus, at an early age, Carol learned that others retreated in the face of her disability, and soon she began to believe, like her mother, that she was somehow flawed and deficient as a result.

Circumstances were such that Aunt Mary and Carol were renting a cottage across the road from FDR, and soon Aunt Mary began spending her evenings playing cards with the governor-elect and his social secretary Missy LeHand. Carol often spent time at his cabin at the start of the evening, and noticed how FDR, never short of words, drew others in around him. Family lore has it that Roosevelt became quite fond of Carol, probably getting to know her better than most of the children at the center because of the proximity of their cottages.

Once, when a push boy helped Carol into the recreational pool, FDR, who was sitting against the side of the pool, greeted her in his usual "Who have we got here" as he lifted Carol up onto his knees and enclosed her in his arms. As other patients gathered around, FDR peppered them with questions, and engaged them by throwing balls and playing other games. As he ventured from the side of the pool, a swarm of children, including Carol, followed, climbing up on him, pushing him under water, all the while laughing with delight. Later that afternoon, after talking to local farmers in the area, FDR stopped in town to buy ice cream for Carol and all the other children, who rushed in their wheelchairs and braces to greet him as his hand controlled car climbed its way up to the Meriwether Inn, the central meeting place at the center.

FDR's fondness for Carol was evident at a subsequent swim meet, which Carol later recounted in her journal:

I was pitted against a considerably bigger and older girl ... and although I didn't stand much of a chance of winning I acquitted myself nobly, due no doubt in great part to the fact that Franklin D. Roosevelt cheered me on loudly and lustily through the race. He filled the air with such exhortations as "Come on, Carol. You can do it. Keep on trying. Come on – I know you can do it – try harder. Good girl. You're getting there."

As their friendship continued to grow, Carol's feelings of ease that she felt so keenly after their first encounter blossomed as well. She soon began to believe that the power resided in her to ease the awkwardness of others, most importantly of her parents, and gain the acceptance she most needed, by hiding her own self-consciousness around her disability. Like FDR, she learned to conceal all feelings related to her disability, never once speaking about the emotional and physical challenges she faced, not even to those she felt closest to. And like FDR, she adopted a very gregarious demeanor, deflecting curiosity about her disability by focusing on the needs and wishes of others.

Although both Carol and FDR paid a high price for appearing as if their impairment was nothing more than a minor impediment – including bouts of depression and a lack of intimacy with those around them – it helped them both to be accepted in society at a time when most people with polio rarely ventured outside of their homes.

Fortunately, FDR not only provided a model for how to ease the emotional side of having a disability but also the physical. Practicing his walking on the grounds of the rehabilitation center, Carol noticed how he always walked alongside somebody else, holding on to his or her arm with one hand and carrying a cane with the other, thereby giving the appearance of only slight impairment. With his legs held in place by his braces, he shifted the weight of his body onto his arms and slowly hitched each leg up and forward, smiling broadly while keeping his head up. Outside of Warm Springs, most Americans weren't aware that he was totally paralyzed in his legs.

This “normalization” philosophy underlined the walking program all patients underwent each afternoon. As elucidated by the head physiotherapist at Warm Springs in a 1932 article in the treatment center's newsletter, *The Polio Chronicle*, patients were taught to make “walking smooth, steady and inconspicuous . . . by moving quietly and steadily without needless body, leg or arm motions which would attract attention to the disability.” Although this was no doubt a tiring and burdensome way to walk, - one that would unknowingly come back to haunt patients years later in the form of post-polio symptoms - seeing FDR made Carol realize that the rewards were worth it. For not only was FDR totally accepted into society, but he was able to achieve the unimaginable. With the memory of FDR's cheering her on at the swim meet, Carol believed that she too could go on to accomplish great things, and it was here at Warm Springs that her fiercely motivated need to achieve was born. She became a concert musician who performed at Carnegie Hall and recorded with Igor Stravinsky.

In December 1928, FDR left for New York to resume his political career. When Carol kissed her friend goodbye, he told her “I hope to see you again soon at Warm Springs.” Months later, after Carol wrote him a letter, he sent her a [letter](#) as well as a [photo](#) of himself with the inscription “For my little friend Carol Greenfeld from Franklin D. Roosevelt, Warm Springs 1929,” which served as a testament to their strong friendship. Carol returned to the rehabilitation center in December 1929, where she stayed for 5 months. Two weeks before she left, FDR came to Warm Springs for a monthlong stay. She eagerly anticipated seeing her old friend, asking Aunt Mary every day when he

would come. On a bright sunny afternoon, the two of them joined the flock of patients in front of the Meriwether Inn, awaiting his arrival.

When FDR pulled up – behind the wheel of his Plymouth roaster, a long convertible with the top down – Carol and Aunt Mary rushed to greet him.

“Why look who’s here,” said FDR. “If it isn’t my little friend Carol.”

“Hi, Uncle Frank,” Carol said.

“He’s the governor of New York” Mary said. “Call him ‘governor!’”

“Are you still going to play with us in the pool?” Carol asked.

“Of course!” FDR said. “You think I’d come all this way and not play in the pool?” And then he gave one of his trademark laughs – full throated, with his head tilted back. Carol giggled as he exited the car, trailed by other patients. These would be their last days together, as he was not at the center during her two subsequent visits as a child.

Decades later, Carol summed up her special feelings toward FDR in the following journal entry:

Roosevelt was my hero, as indeed he was to all children (and undoubtedly adults as well) who were crippled. The world will not easily forget the special tilt of his chin and all the resolve, courage and determination that made it so unforgettable. That tilt, I believe, had a very special meaning to those of us who shared his personal fate of living with substantial physical impairment, determined to meet the considerable challenge of living our lives fully and well, despite our physical limitations. . . . He was the human embodiment of the Indians’ legendary spirit who lived in the ground stoking the fires to keep the water warm, in order to heal bodies and restore spirits.

Their relationship, however short, impacted Carol throughout her life. Although while I was growing up my mother never uttered a single word to me about her disability, she proudly displayed the photo and letter from FDR in her music room, where it continued to serve as a source of inspiration for her. And in the last months of her life, as she battled cancer, she wrote of FDR in her journals, saying “I need his courage now. I feel strong being ‘one’ with him.”

When I think about my mother – her gregarious personality, her ability to put others at ease by never mentioning her disability, and her ability to draw other people to her – I think of our former president, who had such a lasting influence on a little girl.

*Anne K. Gross, PhD, is the author of [The Polio Journals: Lessons from My Mother](#). To learn more about her and her book, visit [www.thepoliojournals.com](http://www.thepoliojournals.com).*