Judy Eades: A Life of Independence, Belonging and Faith

Longtime NPSA Board member reflects on resilience, community and living life on her own terms.

by Melodae Horst, APR, SHRM-SCP

Judy Eades tells her story in a way that depicts a lifetime refusing to be defined by polio.

“I like to be independent,” she says. “And I have been all these years.”

Eades built a life marked by service, family and faith. Now 78, she remains a steady and thoughtful presence as in the Nebraska Polio Survivors Association, where she has served on the NPSA Board of Directors for about a decade and continues to support fellow survivors as the Board secretary with openness, honesty and compassion.

Eades says she grew up on a farm near Red Oak, Iowa, in a large family, initially of 13 children. Though three died young, she was one of 10 who grew up together. When she was almost 5, she developed a fever and headache; both were signals of polio. Her mother recognized the symptoms immediately. Eades was taken to Omaha and spent three months at St. Joseph Hospital.

What followed was a long recovery, she recalls, with lasting weakness in her right leg. After returning home, she was shaped by determination and the care of her mother, whom Eades described with gratitude. Her mother helped her with therapy, exercises and daily treatments, she says, while balancing the demands of farm life and raising a large family. Years later, Eades publicly thanked her for that devotion.

“That woman was a saint,” Eades says.

Eades wore a brace for decades, first a short leg brace, and later a long one as her knee weakened. She worked in the garden, milked cows and did what she could alongside her siblings, although “they, thought I was spoiled, because I didn’t have to do a lot of that, but what I could do, I did.”
Even then, the expectation was clear: participate, contribute and keep moving, even though she walked with a limp.

Making an Impact Teaching

The mindset to keep moving forward carried into adulthood. After graduating from Red Oak High School, she worked at Mutual of Omaha for one year before attending junior college in Clarinda, Iowa. After transferring to the College of St. Mary in Omaha and graduating in 1970, Eades started teaching first grade in Council Bluffs. For a decade, she taught children to read and write, finding purpose, she says, in helping them build the skills they would carry for life.

> ***“I was helping change people’s lives, and teaching them to read and write,” she says, “forming their basic skills that they’re going to use the rest of their lives.”***

After starting a family with her husband, Don Eades, she stepped away from teaching.

“I just wanted to do something part-time and stay home and raise kids,” she says.

Balancing work with raising three children, she later worked part time as a secretary at Bergan Mercy Hospital, working evening shifts, so her children would spend less time in day care. Through it all, polio remained part of her life but never defined its limits.

Eades walked with a brace, adapting as her body changed. She remained on her feet until age 60, when years compensating for her affected leg took a toll.

Judy Eades at home with husband Don Eades, ready for an outing at the lake.

> ***"My good leg just wore out," she says. "It was just done. I had abused my other limbs all those years."***

Above: Eades with granddaughter Ani Grace. Below: Eades at the familiy's Minnesota lakehouse.

Focus on the Possible

Hers is a story that may be all too familiar for others who have developed post-polio syndrome as they aged. She then transitioned to a wheelchair, which was a change, she says, that ultimately brought new freedom.

"Things got better when I did get in the wheelchair," she says. "Then I was able to go to the zoo. I could go to airports and go all over."

Today, she and her husband are retired and grandparents to five. Rather than focusing on what she had lost, she focused on what was still possible, such as spending summers in Minnesota and going deer hunting, and then ice fishing in the winter.

"I skip the ice fishing, usually, but my granddaughter loves to fish," she says. "So, I've been out there a few years."

With a wheelchair and adapted vehicle, Eades found she could continue traveling, attend family and church events. Modifying her home allowed her stay safe, active and connected. The home adaptations allow her to enjoy meeting with the same group of friends she has associated with for years. They meet in her home regularly now.

Eades and her Mount Michael moms group have been meeting for 26 years. "Father Louis, from Mount Michael, has been our hero all these years," Eades says.

An Outlook that Shapes Community

That same view of family and friends shaped her connection to the polio survivor community early on in her life. When Eades came to college in Omaha, she attended a polio-related gathering with NPSA founder, Nancy Carter. The experience, she says, was deeply meaningful.

> ***"It served its purpose, because when I first came to Omaha, I never knew one person with polio, ever," Eades says, of her first NPSA meeting.***

Suddenly, she was in a room filled with people who understood braces, wheelchairs, physical limitations and the daily reality of living with the long-term effects of polio.

"I didn't feel quite as alone," she said. "I felt a little more normal with a whole bunch of polio people."

That sense of belonging has kept her involved in communities of polio survivors ever since. She joined the "Bransongoers" group that traveled to Branson, Missouri, each year, participating there in polio support gatherings and organizing social events for survivors. Eades says she then decided to become involved with NPSA leadership as a Board member.

Today, the NPSA challenges are real, she says. Membership is small, survivors are aging, and recruiting participation can feel like "an uphill battle." But she also believes deeply in the group's purpose. The organization gives people a place to connect, to share experiences and to learn from one another.

Eades hasn't stopped offering candid input, practical support and personal outreach to help members stay involved. Sometimes, she said, a phone call, text or reminder is what makes the difference in whether someone shows up.

Still, she believes strongly in the mission and in the need to keep adapting. She has emphasized the importance of offering engaging in-person meetings that are relevant for attendees. Bringing in speakers in with fresh ideas is another key. Topics should not just be about medical issues, she says, but also about aging, emotional health and practical ways to make daily life easier.

"Having a speaker is wonderful," she says. "That's the draw."

Beyond programming, she values the simple act of bringing people together. For many, including herself, the Association provides something rare: a place where no explanation is needed.

Opting for Quality of Life

In recent years, Eades revealed facing another major challenge of being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and undergoing chemotherapy and radiation, which she described as extremely difficult. Since then, she has chosen to focus on comfort and quality of life rather than additional treatment.

She has an in-home aid who helps her with cooking and washing, while another person comes once a month to clean. She also benefits from support from two of her sisters who are nurses. "They told me they would 'be with me until the bitter end,'" she says, and one sister told her, "'You know Judy, I can be a real pit bull when it comes to getting your meds for you.'"

“So, that’s very supportive and comforting to me,” Eades said.

She speaks about her diagnosis with clarity and peace. Her faith remains central to that outlook, as does her lifelong independence.

“I am at peace with it,” she says. “I’ve been that way since the beginning.”

Even now, Eades continues to show up for her family, for her community and for fellow survivors. Her story reflects not only survival, but resilience, adaptability and grace.

For NPSA Judy Eades represents a generation that lived through polio and she is now grappling with the effects of post-polio syndrome. She continues to lead, connect and inspire.

> ***“I don’t regret anything,” she says. “So, I’m just going to take it one day at a time. I’m just going to live until He tells me it’s time.”***

Eades, second from left , front row with her sisters — four of them are nurses. All photos in this publication were submitted.