

Keith Peterson: Be All You Can Be

Four-Part Series Written By Gery L. Deer

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Part I – In the Beginning

In May of 1961, at just two years of age, Cedarville resident Keith Peterson was stricken with spinal meningitis, a potentially fatal bacterial infection that invades the fluid and membranes around the brain and spinal cord. Once infection starts, it spreads rapidly throughout the body and if not treated immediately the results can be devastating.

The National Meningitis Association reports that there are nearly 3,000 cases of spinal meningitis, now more commonly referred to as bacterial meningitis, every year in the United States. Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that 10 to 12 percent of all cases of the disease result in fatality.

While infants and older people are the most susceptible this relentless and contagious infection can attack even the healthiest of individuals at any age. Left untreated, the disease can cause brain damage in a matter of hours and can be fatal within a day. For those who do survive its rampage, the after-effects can last a lifetime.

Angela Curfman, Keith's sister, was only 4 years old when her brother became ill. "Keith became very ill with a high fever and was taken to the doctor," Curfman recalled. "At the time we were living at our grandparents outside of Cedarville and he was sent to Greene Memorial Hospital."

Since spinal meningitis affects both the brain and the spinal cord, victims of the infection often suffer life-long physical and neurological problems. The CDC reports that about 20 percent of meningitis survivors suffer long-term effects including blindness, brain damage and various physical disabilities. Recurring epileptic seizures are also common.

Though Keith recovered from the illness it changed his life forever. He suffered brain and neuromuscular damage and also lost the majority of his eyesight. He had to start all over again, barely out of his toddler years, learning basic skills and coping with the loss of sensory and motor control. With all of that, Keith remained an active, energetic child.

Curfman remembers her brother being as active as any of the other children she knew. "I don't know if I was just too young to notice, but except for his blindness Keith went outside and played and we acted like normal kids," she said. "We lived in an apartment building on the corner of Market and Monroe Street in Xenia and he ran in the back yard like all other kids."

Keith's physical and mental disabilities did not seem to slow him down, but, according to those around him, his blindness is the one problem that seemed to restrict his development the most. At the age of 6, Keith was sent to Columbus, Ohio to attend the Ohio State School for the Blind (OSSB).

Originally opened in 1837 as the Ohio Institution for the Education of the Blind, the institution was the first public school for the blind in the United States. Visually impaired students from 3 to 21 years of age have the opportunity to complete their entire education in one specialized location from kindergarten through high school. Publicly funded programs at the facility also provide vocational training if needed.

Keith lived at OSSB until he was 13, coming home during the summer months and on holidays. His eyesight never really improved though he can see colors and large, close shapes. While the education he received at OSSB helped him cope with his blindness, he still required further training to help him with advanced daily living and vocational skills.

When he was 19 years old Keith was enrolled at the William A. Proctor Center in Cincinnati. For two years he lived at the facility and learned the skills needed to manage his day-to-day life that most people take for granted.

Over the years, Keith adjusted to his world with perseverance, occasionally adjusting things to suit him instead. Now, at the age of 50, Keith is an organized, active adult. With the help of professional care providers, he once again lives in Cedarville in his own apartment.

This bright, thoughtful and friendly man does everything that most people do every day – he just does them a little differently. He gets up in the morning, has breakfast, goes to work, does his laundry and he even has a home office. Like everyone else he is concerned about the economy and is careful with his money and, though he cannot drive, he has an amazing mind for road directions.

More energetic than many of his age, Keith enjoys running and doing things outside, often giving his caregivers a workout as well just keeping up with his energetic pace. He likes working on the computer and his PC is outfitted to display large fonts, responding to his actions verbally when he types on the keyboard. Keith especially enjoys movies, his favorites of which have a military theme.

To the sighted, it might seem difficult for someone who is blind to “watch” television. In reality, Keith actually listens to the dialogue, sound effects and music that are used to tell the story, much in the same way the dialogue and written action is used in a book.

“I have a lot of war movies that I like,” Keith said. “I like Jarhead.” His choice of movies is consistent with his interest in the military. “I want to join the Army or the Marines,” he said. “Here’s my Marine book,” he continued, holding a copy of a recruitment brochure. “They said I’m too old.”

Over the next three weeks, this series will examine Keith's home and work life and see how he's managing with the assistance of organizations like Greene Inc. and Equal People, of Springfield. It will also uncover what the future may hold for this determined man. Hopefully, through Keith's story, someone out there might find the assistance they need for themselves or a loved one.

Don't miss Part II: There's No Place Like Home

Keith Peterson : Be All You Can Be

Part II: There's No Place Like Home

After contracting spinal meningitis as a toddler, 50-year-old Keith Peterson has managed to make his way from illness to independence, but the journey was not an easy one. It took the help of his family and countless professionals for him to achieve as normal and independent a home life as possible.

Keith was far less impacted by his physical and mental disabilities than he was from the loss of his eyesight. After about seven years of training at the Ohio State School for the Blind in Columbus, Keith learned to cope with his blindness in his own way.

At 19, he still needed to learn to handle everyday tasks such as personal hygiene, doing laundry and other basic household chores. He was enrolled for two years at the William A. Proctor Center in Cincinnati to learn these skills and has, over time, developed into a well-organized and schedule-conscious adult.

Keith spent the majority of his life living with his mother until he was accepted into a multi-person living facility for the developmentally disabled. Despite any physical or mental limitations, Keith has learned to take care of himself and manage his day, just like everyone else.

In 2007 his family asked the Greene County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disability (MRDD) to recommend options for in-home, round-the-clock assistance for Keith. The goal was to help him move from the group setting into a more independent environment.

Greene County MRDD provides many such services to mentally challenged individuals and their families. The goal of the organization is to enhance the continued development of mutually beneficial partnerships between those with various disabilities and their Greene County communities.

In November of 2007, Keith moved into his own apartment in Cedarville, but he still needed some help around the house even with his endless determination. In situations like this, however, personalities and needs may vary considerably and some services may not be a good fit right off the bat.

"We had one organization that was helping Keith for about a year but it didn't work out," explained Keith's sister, Angela Curfman. "You really have to find a good fit and people who understand the individual that they are working with." Fortunately for Keith the second agency, called Equal People, was a perfect match.

Equal People is a private, in-home care organization that specializes in supporting the needs of MRDD clients. Based in Springfield, the company has been providing Keith with full-time, in-home assistance since April of 2008.

Caregivers from Equal People work with Keith essentially anytime he is not at his daytime job. Someone from the agency is with him during the second and third shifts from Monday to Friday and on all three shifts over the weekend. They help him with cooking, hygiene, household chores errands, and take him to the Dayton Avenue Baptist Church twice every Sunday.

Don Lough is the owner and founder of Equal People, which serves clients in Greene, Warren and Clark counties. “I’d worked in the business for other companies before but I was never happy with how they were being run so I opened my own,” said Lough, an entrepreneur who still works in the field. “I’m a working owner and if I’m not working on my computer I’m out with a client.”

Funding for services provided by Equal People and other similar organizations comes from the state through referral by the county MRDD agencies. “The cases I do are referred to as individual option, or I.O., waivers,” Lough explained. “Funding is determined based on the need of the client following an assessment by doctors and psychologists.”

“With I.O. waivers, client services can be provided anywhere from 10 hours a week to up to 24 hours a day, as in Keith’s case,” Lough continued. Keith’s situation requires him to have a home care companion anytime he is not at work but, according to them, working with him is a pleasure.

Todd Flesch is one of Keith’s three caregivers from Equal People. “Keith is one of the most fun clients you can have,” he said. “He is very structured and has a set time for doing things from making breakfast to getting his clothes ready for the next day.” Flesch also remarked on Keith’s interest in exercise. “He is active and energetic and likes to go out and run,” Flesch said.

Keith agreed with the assessment. “I jog,” Keith said, making a running motion with his arms to emphasize the point. “I like doing jumping jacks and pushups too.” Wherever possible, caregivers try to use the client’s interests to motivate social interaction and, like working a job, recreational events provide an ideal setting.

At the Special Olympics events on May 17, Keith took home a 3rd place ribbon in the softball toss, similar to a shot-put competition and put his running skills to work as well. With his Equal People helper serving as his eyes, Keith finished fifth in the 100-yard dash. Events like this keep Keith active but before he can participate he has to be able to get there.

Even if his blindness were not an issue, Keith’s ability to drive would still be limited so he must rely on others for transportation. In the evenings and on weekends his care providers from Equal People take him wherever he needs to go, but during the week the Greene County Transit Board provides him with a daily round-trip ride to and from work.

Greene CATS, as it is more widely known, provides public transportation seven days a week from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. throughout Greene County and some areas of Montgomery. The service is available to anyone at flag stops and by scheduling the trip in advance for on-demand, curbside pickup.

The establishment of basic living needs and dependable transportation has Keith ready to head off to work. Don’t miss Part III: Workin’ Man Blues.

Writer’s Note: *The terms “mental retardation” and “developmental disability” were the current clinically-accepted terminologies provided during the research for the Keith Peterson series. This type of terminology is in no way intended to restrict or label any individuals based on their particular disability. Accepted nomenclature changes regularly based on research and accepted clinical definitions. These terms should never be used as negative slang.*

Keith Peterson : Be All You Can Be

Part III: Workin' Man Blues

By the age of 19, Keith Peterson had survived a childhood bout with spinal meningitis and learned to deal with the blindness it left behind, but he still had a great deal to learn. Other physical and mental disabilities resulting from the illness precluded him from learning even basic, household tasks in a mainstream environment.

After two years at the William A. Proctor Center in Cincinnati, and with the assistance of organizations like Equal People in Springfield, Ohio, Keith has learned to take care of himself and manage his day. As he got older, it eventually became clear that the need to learn job skills would be essential if he were ever to achieve any level of independence.

One of the most important things in life is to feel purposeful and productive, which can be difficult enough for the average person. For someone in Keith's situation, finding a job is not only frustrating but nearly impossible. Since he would not get the opportunity to join the United States Armed Forces, as he had always wished to do, Keith needed assistance in securing some other kind of work.

In addition to providing resources to Keith and his family for supported living, case managers with the Greene County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disability (MRDD) work with other agencies to evaluate, train and place those individuals who are potentially eligible for employment. "MRDD has helped Keith become a more independent person in the community," said Keith's sister, Angela Curfman. "They [MRDD] have provided him a place to go throughout the week and learn some work skills."

For more than 15 years Keith, who recently celebrated his 50th birthday, has been employed by Greene, Inc., an organization which is, according to their website, "the Adult Services affiliate of the Greene County Board of MRDD." A non-profit corporation, Greene, Inc. specializes in vocational training, rehabilitation, employment and social services for individuals with disabilities or economically disadvantaged. The agency also noted on their website, "Services are consumer driven and based upon personal choice and preferences."

Greene, Inc. is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), the State Department of Mental Retardation and Development Disabilities Accreditation, and Bureau of Worker's Compensation Ten Step Safety Program.

Since the facility accepts subcontracting work from many areas of manufacturing, from plastic injection molders to printing companies, employees have the opportunity to learn a variety of skills including assembly processes and packaging. Keith works at Greene, Inc. for up to six hours per day, Monday through Friday, and has done many different kinds of jobs.

"Keith's latest job that he was learning was packing fire starters that are sold throughout the community at stores like Groceryland," said Curfman. The product Curfman referred to is a packaged fire starter type used to ignite back yard or camp ground fire.

Besides manufacturing support, Greene, Inc. also offers customers laundry and janitorial service, secure document handling, community employment and various day programs. Diversification of the services provided to customers helps the agency to provide more opportunity for work within the restrictions of an individual's disabilities.

Unfortunately, specialty service providers like Greene, Inc. are not immune to the effects of a faltering economy. When manufacturing slows down, so does the need for labor. As a result, Keith is experiencing changes at his job, which does not set well for someone who depends on structure and consistency. "They cut back work in the workshop," Keith complained in a somewhat frustrated tone. "They're not giving me enough of a paycheck anymore."

As with any American worker today, Keith is concerned about the state of the economy and works hard to manage his money wisely. "He budgets his money out," his sister commented. "He keeps it separated so that he knows how much he has to spend and what it will be used for."

Fortunately for Keith, he does not have to worry about spending it on gasoline. His diminished eyesight and other mental and physical challenges keep him from driving on his own but he does have reliable transportation.

The Greene County Transit Board, more commonly known as Greene CATS, provides Keith with a daily round-trip ride from his home in Cedarville to work Xenia and back. Greene CATS provides public transportation seven days a week from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. throughout the area for anyone who requests the service. Occasionally, however, Keith does not have to worry about getting a lift to work.

In addition to his work at Greene Inc., Keith also has a home office. From there he can help the Equal People staff with various tasks like faxing and practices his computer skills. "I do a lot of copying," Keith said, sitting in front of the computer on his desk which has been outfitted to tell him verbally which keys he is typing.

Thanks to his family, Greene County MRDD and Greene, Inc., it seems that Keith Peterson has his work cut out for him, hopefully for some time to come. To learn more about services available from Greene, Inc. or other agencies mentioned in this article, go online to www.greenemrdd.org or call Greene County MRDD (937) 562-5600.

Don't miss the final installment of Keith Peterson: Be all you can be, next week. Watch for Part IV: Others Will Follow.

Keith Peterson : Be All You Can Be

Part IV: Others Will Follow.

Every day millions of people in America wake up in the morning, dress, go to work or school, spend time with family and friends, and go about their day unaware of the ease with which they live their lives. For Keith Peterson, whose life was changed forever by spinal meningitis at the age of 2, it took a great deal of help, hard work and persistence to master the arts of daily living.

Keith started out like any other healthy kid but his childhood illness left him with various physical and mental disabilities, the most imposing of which was severe blindness. As he grew up, he was forced in his own unique ways to adjust to the same world that everyone else takes for granted.

Thanks to the support of his family and an array of services coordinated through the Greene County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disability (MRDD), Keith has accomplished a great deal. Having recently turned 50, he has an apartment of his own, a job and in-home help, but he still has plenty he wants to do.

Most people want to be productive and feel a sense of accomplishment, that's why Keith wants to continue to work and learn more on his job at Greene, Inc., however it is still unclear how the agency will be affected by the economic recession. The news is full of stories about cuts in social services of all kinds and Greene County agencies are by no means immune to the effects of the erratic economy.

Greene, Inc. is the adult services affiliate of the Greene County MRDD which currently serves 295 individuals with physical and mental challenges by providing them with valuable employment and training. The work is made possible through contract labor services offered by Greene, Inc. to outside companies, some of which are feeling the effects of the economy and limiting their production output.

Right now Keith works on assembly and packaging projects, but should Greene, Inc. lose valuable production contracts, his work hours may be cut or he could possibly lose his job altogether. However, his work would be replaced by habilitation programming, which would be provided at Greene, Inc.'s facilities. The prospect of having his job change in the future is upsetting to Keith.

As mentioned in Part III: Workin' Man Blues, Keith is interested in the economy and he is concerned about these potential cutbacks on services and reduced work hours. Expressing a need to speak up about the problem, he recently wrote letters to President Obama and various United States Senators expressing his distress regarding the current economic situation.

He also noted his views on the potential development of an expanded public transportation system including rural bus lines and rail services. The Greene County Transit Board, more commonly known as Greene CATS, currently provides area residents with local, daily, round-trip transportation.

Long-distance travel, however, is still not an option for most physically challenged people and a more advanced public transportation network would be of great help to those individuals. Keith may be on

the road to becoming an activist for social services, but for now he is focused on taking advantage of the summer season and enjoying his weekends off.

He especially likes to get outside and get together with friends and family. "Keith enjoys everything that most other people do at this time of year, but with help," said Angela Curfman, Keith's sister. He enjoys visiting the National Museum of the United States Air Force, attending church functions, and especially going to the movies.

"Going to the movies is a big deal," said Curfman. "For a blind person to go and not be able to see the screen, the movie needs to have a lot of talk and action." The action is what Keith loves, which is why he was excited to finally see the latest Terminator film. While these solitary activities are fun for him, Keith is an outgoing and socially interactive person who enjoys spending time with others.

Last year, he hosted a Christmas party in his home for his caregivers and he is looking forward to what he calls a "big cookout" for his caregivers later on in the summer. He would also like to take a vacation. "I want to go to Niagara Falls," he said. "I want to see what the weather is like there." He may have had a struggle on his hands to get this far, but it is clear that Keith still has much to do.

Keith Peterson may not have achieved all he has on his own, but regardless of any outside influences, his strength of will and character have urged him onward, despite his challenges. There are thousands of stories about people just like Keith all around the country but now Greene County knows of one right here at home.

Hopefully his story will encourage others to work hard, have faith and do everything possible to overcome the adversities of life and let those like Keith be an inspiration. Where he leads, others will follow.

Acknowledgement:

Developing a series like "Keith Peterson: Be All You Can Be" requires the cooperation of many people, especially those charged with the care of the individual upon which the story is based. I would like to thank Keith's family and representatives of Greene County MRDD, Greene, Inc., Equal People, and the Greene County Dailies. My best wishes go to Keith Peterson and his family.

The End