

Doug Moe: Post-polio syndrome's poster child

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Bob Williams has spun a lot of stories in a lifetime of public relations in Wisconsin, and once he even helped elect a governor.

There is not a lot Williams, who runs Idea Associates in Stevens Point, hasn't seen. At 85, he seemed destined to ride into the sunset with a smile on his face and maybe a glass of gin in his hand, surrounded by admiring friends.

Last fall, fate intervened. Williams now finds himself in the unusual position of trying to get the word out -- not about one of his clients, but rather a devastating disease which, it turns out, can come back and bite people a half century after they first contract it.

"They asked me to talk about it," Williams was saying recently, referring to the medical people who helped Bob discover that the unwelcome visitor that so weakened his legs last year was in fact something called post-polio syndrome.

Williams -- always a nonconformist -- first came down with polio not as a child, but at age 29.

Born in Neenah, educated at UW-Madison, Williams took a public relations job with Sentry Insurance in Stevens Point in 1953.

It was the following year, working for Sentry, that he took a business trip to New York City and Syracuse and contracted polio. Back home in Wisconsin, he suffered paralysis in his right arm and shoulder and acute fatigue -- but not paralysis -- in his legs.

Williams, his wife, Mary -- later to be a member of the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents -- flew to Florida, where Bob did seven weeks of physical therapy on his legs.

The therapy was successful. "They had to carry me on the plane to fly down," Williams said, "and when we got back, I walked off the plane."

Use of his right arm would be severely limited for the rest of his life, but you got the sense Williams scarcely noticed. His career took off. In 1958, Williams left Sentry to start his own firm, Idea Associates, in Stevens Point, keeping Sentry as a client.

He and his good friend Bill Kraus, who worked at Sentry, got involved behind the scenes in Republican politics. Their list of winners was not particularly distinguished, but then in the late 1970s they convinced Lee Dreyfus, the UW-Stevens Point chancellor, to run for governor. Mary Williams had helped hire Dreyfus as chancellor when she was a regent.

Dreyfus won an unlikely victory in 1978, and Kraus came with him to Madison. Bob and Mary stayed in Point, but they came to Madison often, and still do.

One evening last October, Williams joined friends for refreshments at a private establishment outside of Stevens Point called the Hot Shot Club. They had barely gotten the gin out of the freezer when Bob went over backwards in his chair, losing consciousness for a minute, and breaking three ribs. It was determined his heart had momentarily stopped.

He spent six days in the Marshfield Clinic with cardiologists, who couldn't be certain why he lost consciousness. Back home, Williams was more concerned that his legs -- which had begun to weaken over the summer -- were now noticeably impaired, to the point he needed a walker to get around.

Williams, a former track athlete, was upset, and wondered what was up. He recalled reading, in the September issue of The Rotarian magazine, a piece about post-polio syndrome. He sought it out again -- symptoms include fatigue, intolerance of cold and weakness in previously affected muscles, such as Williams' legs -- and shared it with his internist, who concluded pretty quickly that post-polio syndrome was exactly what Williams had -- some 56 years after contracting the disease.

"Many people have never heard of post-polio syndrome," the Rotarian piece noted, even though "as many as 55 percent of an estimated 775,000 polio survivors in the United States may be at risk of developing it."

Williams started physical therapy, and it has been a success. The walker has been set aside, and he's walking a mile three times a week indoors at UW-Stevens Point.

Now Williams is on a mission to make more people -- including the medical establishment -- aware of post-polio syndrome. His friend Kraus calls him the "poster child" for it. Can you be a poster child at 85? Bob Williams can.

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