

Lois's Community

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Lois hurt. Her back was so sensitive that a bumpy car ride produced agonizing jolts of pain. Her generalist doctor was not very concerned; he told her that back pain was common among young women with many responsibilities. Certainly Lois had responsibilities! She was a 31-year-old bookkeeper with three young children, newly married to her second husband. Yet she sensed her pain was no ordinary back strain. Dissatisfied, she also consulted an Ob-Gyn and a chiropractor. Both reached the same conclusion: the source of her pain was stress. The year was 1962, when women's complaints of pain were often discounted by male physicians.

Lois persisted. A coworker recommended a back surgeon, Dr L. He took X-rays of her back and found clear signs of tuberculosis in her vertebrae: Pott's disease. She probably acquired it while providing care to an aging relative 5 years earlier. Prior to surgery, Dr L. prescribed a long course of antibiotics and bed rest. Lois quit her job, but she was a young mother and true bed rest was not possible. For the next year, she swallowed nine pills at each meal, and drove herself to clinic every day for an injection of streptomycin. For that—the pills and the shots—I thought Lois, my mother, was the bravest woman in America!

When her medical treatment ended in November 1963, Lois entered a tuberculosis (TB) sanatorium for back surgery. Lois's surgery involved debridement of the infection and a bone graft from her hip to stabilize the spine, standard treatment at the time. When she awoke, she was in a body cast from shoulders to hips. She could not sit up or roll over. Several times a day, she heard a parade of nurses marching toward her room to turn her.

Time dragged. Lois was flat on her back, helpless, scared, bored, and separated from home. She did not complain of pain. Instead, she worried about her motherless children. She had days of hopelessness and apathy. But she had a community of support to lift her up, including her loving new husband, John.

Recently I found a journal she kept during that time, noting several visitors each day. John and our pastor were with her every day. On Sundays, my brothers and I (ages 11, 9, and 6 years) were allowed to visit her, even though children were typically not permitted in the TB sanatorium. Relatives, friends, coworkers, and church members brought books, puzzles, and knitting supplies. Lois learned to knit while laying on her back, and she taught other patients. She watched a lot of soap operas. She was in the TB sanatorium for 4½ months.

January 1, 1964—In TB San flat on my back. Children came to see me.

January 5, 1964—Read book. Mom, John Sr., & the kids were in to see me. Also pastor and wife. Gave [son] his scarf. He was real happy. Homesick tonight.

January 18, 1964— [Friend] brought 7 sweater kits from yarn shop. Bought one. [Friend] renewed my spirit to knit. Was losing interest.

February 2, 1964—Sunday—[she listed 8 church members & pastor], John & kids—my visitors—just talked all day long.

While Lois mended in the TB sanatorium, our lives at home had huge gaps. Lois was a warm, loving, protective parent, and she was gone. We didn't know when she would return. We children were left in the care of a new, less-warm stepparent, John, and life felt uncertain. Every Sunday, we raced to Lois's bedside for our weekly dose of mother-love.

But the same community that supported Lois surrounded us, sustaining daily routines and providing life comforts. Church women signed up every day for 5 months to prepare our

suppers. A neighbor watched us after school. Our grandmothers did laundry, ironing and mending. An aunt cleaned house. Teachers checked in with us and, weekly, my brother's fourth-grade class sent a get-well card to Lois. One evening after school, we arrived at the neighbor's house to find three bushel baskets of canned food. These were donations made by schoolchildren for needy families at Christmas. We were the needy family that year.

February 10, 1964—Monday—Got my cast off today! Hoorah!!!!

February 15, 1964—wrote letter to [sister and sister-in-law]. Knitted, read, worked crossword puzzles. Was longest day out here. Snowstorm. No visitors except [pastor]. John didn't make it.

In February, after 3 months on her back, Lois shed the body cast. She spent the next 6 weeks rebuilding her strength. One day in March, the doctor said, "You can go home today." She was packed and ready to go when John arrived that evening. She made no journal entries that day, but 3 months later:

June 12, 1964—Friday—discovered diary today while cleaning house. Am home feeling wonderful. Children are helping clean house.

As I reflect on Lois's story, I find myself imagining the absence of this community. What if we had no people who cared about us? What effect would social isolation have on Lois's mental health and physical recovery as she lay helpless for months? How would her husband split time between work, hospital, children, and housework? Cut off from our mother, how would Lois's children have fared?

This was my early lesson in the concept, "social determinants of health," underscoring the value of social relationships and community support to promote and sustain health. As a child, I could not fully appreciate the contributions made by our community. I was more focused on what was missing. Now, when I think about the loving dedication of all those precious people in our lives, their expressions of hope and encouragement, their frequent trips to the hospital, their provision of creature comforts, their constant show of love for my mother and her little family, I get misty-eyed with gratitude.