



The Polio Crusade, a PBS documentary that features scenes shot at Tewksbury Hospital, premieres on Feb. 2. Here is a scene where Lowell resident Helen Blaschke, a nurse at Lowell General Hospital, tends to a young polio patient portrayed in the film.

COURTESY PHOTO

LGH nurse combats polio in documentary

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TEWKSBURY — It would strike without warning.

What started out as a simple fever could quickly turn into paralysis.

Nobody knew where it came from or how it was being transmitted.

At its height, poliomyelitis struck fear in the hearts of Americans like little else could.

"In some respects, it was worse than the HIV epidemic," Massachusetts state epidemiologist Alfred DeMaria said. "In a matter of a few days, you could go from totally healthy to totally incapacitated. It was devastating, and it came out of nowhere."

The polio epidemic that gripped the United States in 1952 yielded more than 57,000 cases. It was the worst in the country's history, spurred on by advances in hygiene that pushed out the age of polio sufferers past infancy and out of reach for the maternal antibodies that babies carry.

Helen Blaschke remembers that time mostly because of her frustration at not being allowed to swim at Wyman's Beach in Westford.

"All we kids knew is that it was hot out, and we wanted to go in the water," the Chelmsford native, now 60, said. "My dad usually was a pushover, but he was adamant about us staying out of lakes and pools. Parents just had no idea where polio started or how it was passed on."

The disease has been on Blaschke's mind a lot recently.

It all started with a phone call from Christine Pondelli, a friend from Blaschke's stint as a nurse at the former St. Joseph Hospital in Lowell.

Pondelli, who now runs the Public Health Museum in Tewksbury, told Blaschke that a film crew was going to shoot a scene for a documentary about polio at the museum and needed a nurse.

"I told her: 'Good for you,'" Blaschke recalled, laughing. "I had just come off a 24-hour shift at Lowell General. But when I started thinking about it, it actually brought back memories for me of the panic that ensued back then."

Soon after, the Lowell resident found herself in a nurse's cap and starched white dress, tending to a boy with cameras trained on her.

The one-hour documentary follows the boy's diagnosis with polio at age 13 and his brush with an iron lung. *The Polio Crusade*, which premieres Feb. 2 on WGBH, also focuses on the race to find a cure for



Film crews work on the set of *The Polio Crusade* at Tewksbury Hospital. An iron lung, a machine used to assist polio patients with breathing, can be seen at right.

polio in the 1950s.

In October, the film crew spent one day at Tewksbury Hospital, which houses the Public Health Museum. In a cafeteria on the first floor of the Old Administration Building, they recreated a 1950s hospital room. An iron lung, which is on permanent display at the museum, also became a centerpiece.

"It was extraordinary and really interesting to watch," Pondelli said. "We were very excited to have them here."

Iron lungs helped patients, whose diaphragms were weakened by acute polio, to breathe. The contraption would apply air pressure to a person's body, which was enclosed in a steel drum. It was used for the first time in 1928 at Children's Hospital in Boston.

"Most people with polio infections did not have the neurological damage that could lead to paralysis," DeMaria said. "But for those who did, many had to be placed in iron lungs. There were whole rooms full of them."

In her 40 years as a nurse, Blaschke has never worked with an iron lung, but remembers seeing one during her nurse's training at St. Joseph's.

Much of the other acting she had to do for the documentary, however, was familiar to the nursing veteran.

"I did some range of motion exercises with the boy. Polio patients had to have their arms, legs and fingers moved regu-

larly, so they didn't lose any more muscle mass than they already had," she said. "We also did some scenes where I was conferring with the doctor over the hospital bed."

Blaschke is taking all the extra attention the documentary has brought on in stride. She isn't even sure that she will watch the premiere, because she will be coming off another 24-hour shift in the Lowell General emergency room.

"Bedtime is usually 7 p.m. then," she said with a laugh. "But we'll be taping it. I don't think I'm meant to be a star, but I'll do my 15 minutes of fame. It was definitely a lot of fun."

DeMaria believes the documentary also serves an important purpose.

Since its eradication from the Americas in 1994, few people realize the importance of polio vaccines and the disease's continued presence in Africa and South Asia, DeMaria said.

"Those who don't remember history are doomed to relive it," he noted. "The vaccine is the only thing between us and 100 polio cases a day."

The Public Health Museum is located in the Old Administration Building at Tewksbury State Hospital, 365 East St. It is open to the public on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., or by appointment. There is a \$5 admission fee. For details, visit <http://www.publichealthmuseum.org>.