

CHILDREN'S CARE HOSPITAL & SCHOOL

# Reflections

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## THE POLIO ERA ENDS

Two years after Dr. Jonas Salk introduced his famous vaccine, 18-month-old Mark Sternhagen contracted polio. It was 1957, and vaccinations were not yet widely available. He recovered from the acute phase of the illness in an iron lung, and learned to walk again using crutches and with braces on both legs.

Mark started school in his hometown of Scotland, SD, but partway through his third grade year, it was determined that he didn't fit well in the public school. There were accessibility issues, and he was fighting with other children who picked on him for being different.

In the spring of 1965, Mark became a residential student at Crippled Children's Hospital & School in Sioux Falls. With polio now eradicated, Crippled Children's was already evolving to serve more children with cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, and other physical disabilities.

He wasn't happy about the move at the time, but has come to see it as a positive, life-changing opportunity. "Instead of feeling sorry for yourself, you could look around at other students who were in similar situations or worse off. There was no excuse for not being able to do things; we pushed each other to do better."

He was a bright child and a voracious reader, sometimes reading a book a day. He skipped sixth grade and spent "every spare minute" of his high school years in Mr. McCoy's Industrial Arts classroom.

"Mr. McCoy was one of the ones there that saw potential in me," says Mark. "He was the school photographer, and taught me a lot about photography, letting me take a lot of pictures for *Reflections* and even for a federal grant project." He also taught him welding and electronics. Even though he was restless in school, Mark had identified his passion.

He graduated from Crippled Children's in 1973 at 17, and attended school at USD/Springfield for a year but says he "wasn't ready for the responsibility of college." After working a few years, he knew he needed to further his education. He returned to USD/Springfield focusing on radio transmitter work and getting a Radiotelephone License from the Federal Communications Commission.

When the state closed the school in 1984, Mark followed his majors to two different schools. In the spring of 1986, he graduated from both schools in one weekend—from Dakota State University with a bachelor's degree in Vocational Technical Teacher Education, and from South Dakota State University with a bachelor's degree in Electronic Engineering Technology (EET). He went on for a master's degree in Industrial Management at SDSU. He has been a full-time instructor in the EET department at SDSU for the

26 years since, teaching computer technology related courses including microprocessors, computer systems and networking. Mark says he makes customer service a major part of all his classes. "That's something I see lacking out there in the computer business," he says.

In his spare time, he enjoys spending time with family, especially on camping trips. He also runs a computer consulting business from his home, serving mostly commercial clients with networking and computer service and support.

At age 56, Mark is among the youngest of American polio survivors. He now uses a wheelchair full-time, and struggles with the after-effects of an illness for which his

doctors have had little, if any, training. It was bad luck that Mark contracted an illness that was on the verge of being eradicated, but he hasn't wasted time letting that get in his way—he learned to overcome obstacles at an early age. "I understand now that coming to CCHS was really good for me," he says. "I would not be what I am today without that experience."



*Mark may have been the last patient with polio to graduate from CCHS.*



*Mark at age 3, near his home in Scotland, SD.*



*Mark Sternhagen, today at age 56, is among the youngest of American polio survivors. ▼*