

The Balloon Man - By Laine King

Here's a story from another perspective. This is a letter my mother wrote to the Louisville Courier Journal, hoping it might reach a very special person.

On September 12, 1949 our daughter age four was stricken with polio. She spent two weeks in our hometown hospital in isolation where she received every available treatment at that time. She was then transferred to Kosair Crippled Children's Hospital in Louisville, Ky., where she remained until December 6.

There are many memories from those three months. We lived almost 300 miles from Louisville. We had no car and very little money. My husband was, at that time, a corporal in the Army. That wonderful organization, the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, did everything in the way of financing the tremendous medical bills which we were absolutely unable to pay. The American Legion post to which my husband belonged came to us with a free will donation of \$50. Many people were so very good to us but there is one person who stands out in my memory and I never even knew his name. I knew him only as The Balloon Man.

The regulations at Kosair Hospital were that visiting hours were from 2pm to 4pm on Sunday afternoons. There were some exceptions from the staff and personnel when relatives would be there for only a short time, but of necessity the rules were adhered to very closely. On Sunday afternoons, long before 2:00, the grounds and corridors of the hospital were thronged with anxious waiting parents, relatives and friends. Inside, the little patients waited just as anxiously in various and pitiful stages of illness. Some were too ill to care very much. Others were well enough to pace their own ward corridors in their braces, wheel chairs, walking sticks, etc. When the time finally arrived it was a time of happiness, sadness and pathos all mixed in one big bundle of humanity when each visitor found at last the little patient who was waiting for him or her. On each of these occasions, I remember this man to whom the children referred to as The Balloon Man. All that I remember about his physical appearance is that he was a rather large man, probably past middle age, and a genial personality that reached out to all those about him. He went from room to room and ward to ward, bringing with him his unlimited supply of bright balloons and with the balloons came an equally unlimited amount of air to blow them up. He brought something else, too. He brought a little bit of cheer and kindness to each and every child and it seemed he never missed a one. There were always some pathetic little ones who would watch with wistful eyes as the visitors came in, hoping the next one would be their mother or father or just anyone so that they would not be so terribly alone and lonely. At last their eyes would have that bleak forsaken look when they realized that today they had no visitor. Before the two hours was over, though, each of them did have a visitor: The Balloon Man. He was not just someone else's mother or father who was kind and visited for a moment because they were sorry for them. He was their own friend and he came to visit them because he was their friend and he cared about them. Many times I saw little faces light up because The Balloon Man came through the door.

Not only did this wonderfully kind man help the children who were patients there. I feel sure he never really knew how much he helped those of us who were the parents of those children. I remember one dreary November evening when our daughter had been there for only a few weeks. When it was five minutes before visiting hours were over, a buzzer would sound. The children soon realized what that signal meant. On this particular afternoon, my daughter put her arms around me and cried and begged me not to leave her. When time was up, I had to forcibly unclasp her arms from around my neck, push her back down on her pillow and walk out with her cry ringing in my ears, "Mama, please don't leave me, please take me home." Outside her room, I leaned against the

wall and sobbed as I had dared not do in her presence. I shall never forget the kind comforting words of The Balloon Man as he happened to walk down the corridor. With a gentle hand on my shoulder, he told me how the children were soon calm and peaceful, once we were gone, how well they were cared for and many more things that were such a source of comfort and peace to me. As I rode those long miles back home on the bus that night I could still hear my little girl's cry, but I also kept hearing the gentle words of comfort and courage spoken by The Balloon Man.

I would like to know who he was. Perhaps he was connected to the hospital in some way. Possibly he was one of the Shriners who did so much to support the hospital. And maybe he was just a man who loved children. Whoever he was, I shall always remember and be grateful to The Balloon Man. America needs more people like him.