



“In The Box”

*Dear Readers of
BoomerTimes & SeniorLife*

Each month we feature a story or highlight something very special, worthy of reading.

Making Lemonade From Lemons— A Tribute To Physically Challenged Amazing Stars

I read in a recent *New York Times* article written by Margalit Fox about a girl from a small Southern town near Charlotte, who lived in a horizontal world—a 7-foot-long, 800 pound iron cylinder that encased all but her head for 60 years. Martha Ann Mason always wanted to become a writer and even though she was a polio victim, paralyzed from her neck down, in 2003, with the assistance of a voice-activated computer, she set her memoir down on paper and you can read her book today. It's called *Breath...Life in the Rhythm of an Iron Lung*.

Ms. Mason died at 71, in her little town of Lattimore, North Carolina. When she got polio at 11, her parents were told that she would only live about year. What makes this story so special is that she was one of the 30 people left who lived full time in iron lungs. It is also believed that Martha lived longest in this condition and yet according to her own account, “a life that was fine and full,” reading voraciously, graduating with highest honors from high school and college, entertaining and eventually writing.

Here are some highlights of her life: Martha was very curious about life and with daily visits from her teachers, she resumed her studies, graduated first in her high school class and entered a local college, receiving an associate's degree in 1958. Afterward, Ms. Mason and her iron lung were transported by bakery truck to Winston-Salem, where she enrolled in Wake Forest College and earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1960. She graduated first in her class in both colleges.

Returning to her home in Lattimore, she began writing for the local newspaper, dictating her articles to her mother, until her father had a heart attack and her mother had to care for him. Ms. Mason wrote only in her head. Everyone in the town helped her and even when her mother became ill, had dementia and became abusive, Ms. Mason insisted that her mother remain at home. From her iron lung, along with her 2 aides, she took over the running of the household, planning meals, paying bills and arranging for her mother's care. This was the time to write her book about her life story and she did.

[This story especially touched me as I volunteered my time for a year in Minneapolis helping Darlene Morse, a woman who also lived in an iron lung. Paralyzed from her neck down from polio at 9, she lived in a hospital and received wonderful therapy from the Sister Kenny Foundation (headquartered in Minneapolis). She loved to have people read to her, take her out during the day in a reclining wheelchair to go to theater, events and observe life (she was trained to frog breathe while awake), and she painted wonderfully with a stick in her mouth. I met her when she was 30 and she truly changed my life. Darlene even helped others who were handicapped by repeatedly writing (by typewriter with a stick in her mouth) to the local newspaper to get handicapped equipment on the buses so everyone could use them. Darlene Morse is a heroic figure to all who had the privilege of knowing her, just like I'm sure Martha Mason is.]