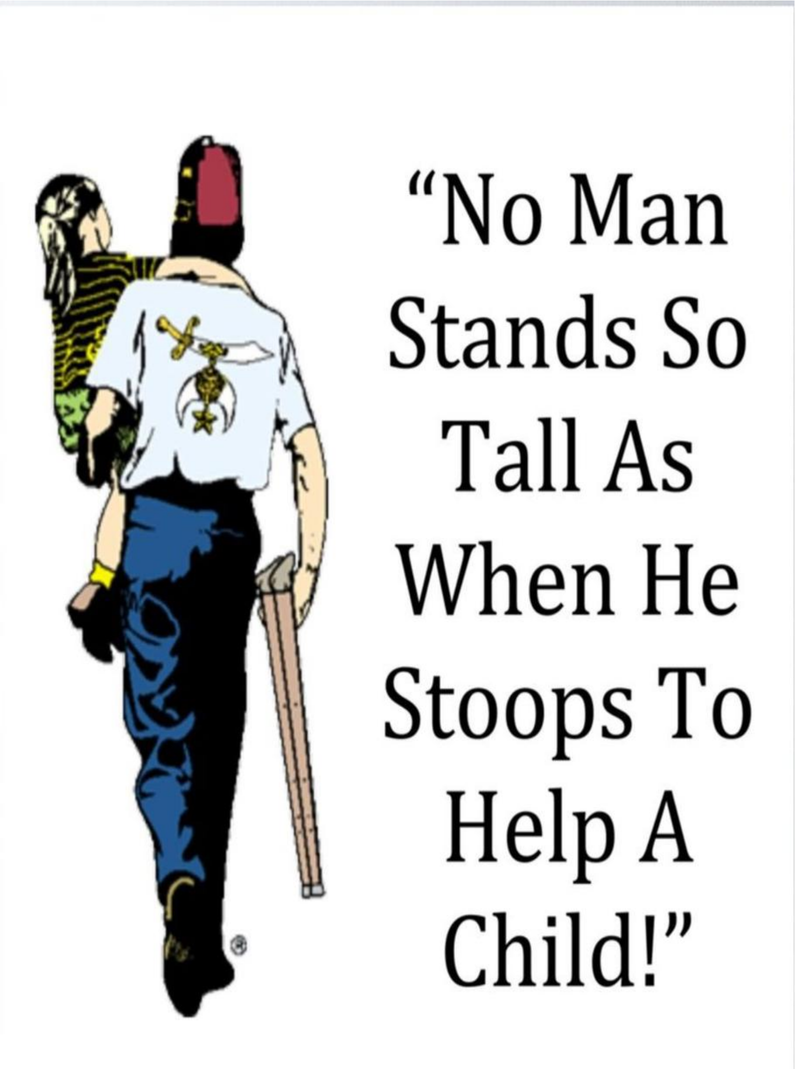

To say I have been blessed in my life is a severe understatement. I and my family have faced lifelong challenges with regards to my birth defect and never ending surgeries and obstacles. It has opened my eyes to maintaining a grateful heart for the many victories , big and small that I have achieved, and every step I have taken. Some a bit more wobbly and not so pretty as normal but nonetheless they were steps ! However I did not achieve these results on my own. A large, generous and supporting group of men gave me everything and the care I needed to have a normal life. To find the words to describe such a group and the significant impact they make on the many lives they touch is difficult. I will share my story by telling you what I was taught.

God gives special problems to special people and how you rise above those things and maintain your faith speaks volumes. Do not feel sorry for yourself because you will always have a reason to be grateful. Be careful not to do anything to mess up what they have accomplished . And never go roller skating or skiing.

My name is Karen Kearns Fritts and I was born in 1964 to a very young set of parents in Richmond , Ky ...... a town right outside of Lexington. Seemingly healthy , with no obvious health concerns I was doted upon as the first child and grandchild in my family . Life was simple and good . We were by no means wealthy but we had what we needed and I was loved.

As I developed from infancy into a toddler my ability to walk never presented itself. I had a strange wobble and made it apparent that I hurt when I attempted to take those first steps. The local country doctor told my parents that it was something I would grow out of and not to worry , but my mother wasn't satisfied with that analogy. Taking me to another physician he pulled my legs down and noted that my left leg was significantly shorter than the other . An X-ray revealed that I had an abnormal left hip ......well actually it was rather absent.

" I can't help her but I know where she needs to be seen. " When our financial limitations were mentioned he reassured my parents that we would not have to pay. It would be taken care of and they need not worry. Every single cent. And it was.

I was 2 years old when I was taken to Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children in Lexington, KY and it was 1966. I had an uncommon genetic defect called Proximal Femoral Focal Deficiency ......PFFD. The hip socket did not form , I had no ball joint nor the femoral neck that attaches to the ball. I was placed under the care of Dr. David Stevens . He and the Shriners team put into place a care/action plan for what at the time was not something encountered frequently. It was then that Shriners Hospital became my new temporary home. My family became nurses / nurse aides / doctors/ therapists / phlebotomists/ radiographers / surgery staff and other patients ....and my parents had to accept and deal with the difficult aspect of leaving me there and trusting this care team with their first born. My mother was 19 and my father 21 and it was a very scary time for them . And a trying one as well. In those days visitation rules were very strict and limited . It was felt that by limiting the parents access , children tended to not be upset as much and nor were emotional parents contributing to an already stressful situation . My parents were limited to minimal weekend visitation and none through the week . It has been explained to me that it was Saturdays only and only during a certain time frame. Then nothing through the week. During my 2 year stint this was very difficult for my parents and it started the unraveling of their relationship which became very strained . Older patients were looked at as "fill-ins"......like foster siblings . My hospital sister was Cindy White and she and I maintained a relationship all through our clinic days together and into our adult years . She made things so much better for me and I will always remember her so fondly.

My time at Shriners was very intense. Surgery after surgery to correct my leg and hip were not only frequent but painful and sometimes unsuccessful. Then a new plan would be made . To numerous to mention , I had osteotomies , bone grafts , limb lengthening with external fixation , traction, body casts (I got chicken pox with one of those boogers on and they tied my hands down to keep me from scratching myself) , hip pinning' a, bars between my legs , braces , ... they never gave up trying to assure that I would walk. Though hopeful , they always warned my parents that there was a strong chance I would never walk.

My mother told me that on one of her visit days Dr. Stevens told her to wait right there. She borderline panicked thinking something was wrong . And at 4 years of age (2 years later) I came around the corner with a walker and proudly professed " Look Momma , I can walk ! " Mother said Dr. Stevens was all smiles and so happy ! She broke down into tears .

Now this in no way was a guarantee that everything was fine and dandy. I was still on a very long road to recovery , with MANY restrictions and limitations. They were not sure how long the bone grafts would last , would they grow with me properly, would the hip stay in the socket created for me , would my leg length difference cause me to limp , how much pain would I have as I aged .... they told my parents I would probably be in a wheelchair by the time I was 20 and to do any and everything they could to protect all they had done. That meant no running, climbing , bike riding , jump roping , and above all else prevent any and all chances of my falling and messing up everything they had so diligently put in place. I was required to attend clinic days once every 3 months, then 6 months and then by the time I was 6 once a year until I was 18. On those clinic days as I watched and listened, I started to gain a new perspective on the roles those men in the "funny little hats " played in so many lives aside from my own. Children were transported there from many areas and yes some without parents present. A Shriner would be assigned to see over that particular child. On those days , I learned how blessed I was . I am so grateful / thankful to have been helped by this organization. Now when I am dealing with pain or limitations, I reflect back on those days to remind me of what others faced. I was and still am one lucky girl.

Thanks to Shriners I led a wonderful life with no limp (unless I had overdone) , very little pain and very few limitations as I aged. I surpassed that wheelchair due for me when I reached 20. And continued until at age 35 , I had to have a total hip replacement . My femur was so weak from all the previous surgical interventions I had , that it cracked during my rod placement. A titanium band was placed around the crack to prevent it from continuing to do so. I was warned once again about that wheelchair . At age 50 I had to have a hip revision. I was warned again about that wheelchair ! When 55 rolled around my knee was turning in and had been reduced to bone on bone from all the years of limping and walking with my leg turned in a different alignment than normal. To preserve my hip joint they needed to re-align my knee with my leg.

I am now on my 4th knee surgery with a total knee replacement , a knee revision and 2 scar tissue surgeries the last being 6/1/2025 . I can tell the hip is starting to give way a bit but I'm still not quite ready for that wheelchair ! Shriners brought me to far to give in right now !

In closing , I just want to thank each of you for the profound difference's you make in so many lives. You are so appreciated and loved. Shriners gave me the gift of trotting to the school bus when I was running late , marching in the band , stepping down into the water for baptism, dancing at my prom , walking up the steps to receive my diploma , completing clinical rotations/ graduating once again plus working in the health care industry for 39 years , walking down the aisle to marry my husband of 37 years , traveling , enjoying being a stepmother and a grandmother ....just so many , many things . Thanks does not cover the true gratitude in my heart. My heart also holds a special place for my Shriners . I may have been carried in ......BUT I WALKED OUT !

My name is Karen Kearns Fritts ......I am 61 years old and I'm proud to still be a

SHRINERS KID !

(and I ALWAYS will be)