

Behind the Scenes of

WARM SPRINGS



I transferred out of my TiLite wheelchair and into a wooden and wicker antique model from the 1920s. At 23 years of age, I had just been cast in my first Hollywood film, Warm Springs, based on a little-known chapter in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's life. Knowing it was going to be an experience I would never forget, I wheeled toward the director, Joseph Sargent, filled with nervous excitement.

BY TEAL SHERER

Warm Springs is a true but lesser known story about Roosevelt that intimately follows his early battle with polio. He seeks out a "miracle" cure in Warm Springs, Ga., after hearing that a young person who contracted polio was able to walk again upon swimming in mineral water.

The film reveals a part of Roosevelt's life that I never learned about in school. My teachers and history books never mentioned it. In fact, it wasn't until the 1985 publication of Hugh Gallagher's *FDR's Splendid Deception* that matters relating to his disability were explored.

More than 10 years later, Gallagher's book helped inspire Margaret Nagle, creator of Lifetime's hit show, *Side Order of Life*, to write *Warm Springs*. Because Nagle had grown up sharing a bedroom with her older brother, who was disabled, FDR's struggle became personal to her.

After contracting polio in 1921 at the age of 39, FDR became paralyzed from the waist down. A wheelchair user, he never stood without the aid of braces nor walked without skilled assistance.

When I heard this, I was shocked. FDR did such a good job of hiding his disability when he was president that very few people knew how disabled he was. His purpose was to maintain an image of invulnerability as commander-in-chief. As Gallagher pointed out in *FDR's Splendid Deception*:

Although there are over 35,000 still photographs of FDR at the Presidential Library, there are only two of the man seated in his wheelchair. No newsreels show him being lifted, carried, or pushed in his chair. Among the thousands of political cartoons and caricatures of FDR,

not one shows the man as physically impaired. In fact, many of them have him as a man of action — running, jumping. ...

When I learned that Kenneth Branagh had been cast as FDR, I was so excited I almost fell out of my wheelchair. He had

and boots, and to a standing position. I'd been wearing sandals and had forgotten to bring socks, so Branagh let me borrow his.

Slowly and with difficulty, I walked, using all my upper body strength to hold myself up, as I propelled each leg forward as best I could. He didn't mirror me or try



Warm Springs is Teal Sherer's first feature movie — Sherer is the dancer on the far left.

been my acting hero since high school when I saw him in the movie version of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Just when I thought my life couldn't get any better, the film's technical advisor, who knew that I was an L2 para, asked me if I would help Branagh prepare for his role.

For our first meeting, I was supposed to teach him how to walk with long-leg braces while using the parallel bars. Wearing jeans, a T-shirt and a baseball cap, Branagh didn't take his eyes off me as the therapist helped me into the braces

to do it himself, but just watched. It was as if his eyes were absorbing every detail into his body.

As many NEW MOBILITY readers know, walking with braces is exhausting, hard work. Though it is beneficial for therapeutic purposes, a para, even a low para like me, would be crazy to use it as a practical means of getting around. But, people with disabilities were treated differently in Roosevelt's time. They were feared and kept at home, hidden from society, especially those with polio, who were considered to be contagious, quarantined and

shunned. If FDR wanted a career in politics, he had to “appear” as if he could walk. Gallagher explained how he was able to pull it off with the help of Elliott, his 18-year old son:

Elliott would stand, holding his right arm at a 90-degree angle, his forearm rigid as a parallel bar. Roosevelt [with his braces on and hidden under his pants] would stand beside Elliott, tightly gripping his son’s arm. In his right hand Roosevelt held a cane. His right arm was straight and

held rigid with his index finger pressed firmly straight down along the line of the cane. In this posture he could “walk,” although in a curious toddling manner. ...

Walking was dangerous and exhausting. Sometimes FDR would grip his son’s arm so tightly that Elliot would have to concentrate from crying out in pain.

Swimming with Branagh

I like to think that Kenneth and I hit it off so well on our first meeting that we

decided to meet the next day wearing a lot less clothes. He claimed he needed to see how I swim, but I prefer to think it was a ploy to see me in my bathing suit.

We took turns. I’d swim the length of the pool while he watched, then he’d swim a lap, and I’d give him feedback. He caught on quickly. By making his lower body appear to be dead weight, his upper body naturally did more work.

In 1924, swimming became an important part of FDR’s life when he went to Warm Springs to stay at the Meriwether Inn. Located 80 miles southwest of Atlanta, Warm Springs was a poor farm community made up of less than 550 people. What attracted people to the

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town were the warm springs, which flowed from Pine Mountain at a rate of 1,800 gallons per minute.

The highly mineralized, 80-degree water was buoyant and counteracted the heavy pull of gravity. Therefore, polio-weakened muscles could be exercised more easily. FDR was delighted that he could swim up to two hours before becoming tired.

I was thrilled when I learned I’d be traveling to Warm Springs to film a scene in the same pool that FDR swam in. The Meriwether Inn, which FDR purchased in 1927 to turn into a polio after-care facility, is now a highly regarded comprehensive rehabilitation center — the Warm Springs Institute of Rehabilitation.

Wearing a green wool swimsuit from the 1920s, I transferred into the historic pool. Because of problems with leaking, the pool is usually kept drained. It was November and chilly out, so I was happy that the mineral water was true to its name, warm.

My character is a woman with polio who, like FDR, goes to Warm Springs for the benefits of the mineral water. In the scene, she and others are lying on wooden therapy tables, while physical therapists do range-of-motion exercises on their legs.

In Roosevelt's day, medical treatment for people with disabilities was scarce. Rehabilitation hospitals were so depressing that they were hard to tell apart from prisons and asylums. Because physical

In the movie, my character sings and dances from her wheelchair at one of these parties. Having been a professional modern dancer for five years with Full Radius Dance Company in Atlanta, and having just finished taking a year of vocal lessons, it was if the role had been written for me.

We filmed the scene in the dining room of a historic Victorian home in Madison, Ga., which is an hour's drive east of Atlanta. While singing the catchy

every second of it, I had never been so happy to transfer back into my TiLite. Thank goodness for modern wheelchairs!

Healing the Soul

Warm Springs never healed FDR's legs, but it did repair his soul. Paralysis was the norm there, so he could let his guard down and be himself. It has been said that FDR's polio was his "log cabin" — most likely a reference to Lincoln's humble beginnings. It softened his image



In this scene, the women dance for President Franklin D. Roosevelt to Frank Sinatra's song, "I Won't Dance."

disabilities were thought to be a sign of inner weakness, people were subjected to severe and painful exercises for "their own good," for moral uplift.

FDR worked hard to make sure Warm Springs would be nothing like that. Described by Gallagher as a "cheerful, active, lovely resort in the country," Warm Springs provided the highest quality of physical therapy and social life. There were parties, poker games, movies, picnics, excursions, and visiting professional artists.

lyrics of "I Won't Dance," a Frank Sinatra song I remember my dad playing as a kid, three other actresses and I perform our choreographed dance for FDR and his party guests. Inspired by the Charleston — the 1920s dance craze — our routine includes circular swinging arm movements, twists and turns in our antique wheelchairs, a figure eight pattern, and ends with our arms outstretched, forming a V.

The wheelchair dance scene took over 14 hours to film, and though I loved

as the privileged, Ivy League playboy, and made him more human and approachable. People of every class could identify with his physical weakness.

Though FDR minimized his disability, he never denied his polio, and he worked hard to improve care and treatment for it. He helped create the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (now known as the March of Dimes), which raised money to fight polio and supported Jonas Salk's research that led to the first polio vaccine.

The premiere of *Warm Springs* was



Top: At the HBO Emmy Party Teal Sherer celebrates with Kathy Bates (in blue), plus the movie's director, his wife and the movie's executive producer.

Right: Teal Sherer enjoys some down-time in set's dressing room.

flashing lights and red carpet. Eighty-three years later, I was there. Excitedly, I reunited with cast and crew members and had my picture taken on the red carpet.

Butterflies danced in my stomach as I made my way into the theatre and transferred into one of the seats. As I sat in ner-



held at the Egyptian Theatre, a Hollywood landmark. Sid Grauman, who later built the world famous Grauman's Chinese Theatre, opened it in 1922 and staged the

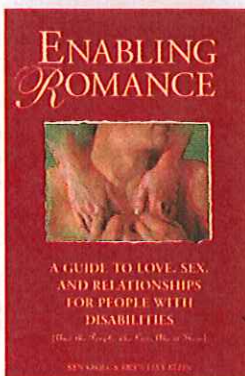
very first Hollywood premiere there. *Robin Hood*, starring Douglas Fairbanks, lit up the theatre with a multitude of stars,

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vous anticipation, I felt someone's lips touch my left cheek. It was Kenneth. I couldn't have asked for a more perfect night.

The film itself, and the experience of acting in it, exceeded all of my expectations, and I felt honored to be a part of it. Because I was injured after implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act and went to one of the best rehabilitation hospitals in the country, it's easy for me to take my independence for granted. Franklin Delano Roosevelt fought many battles so that we could have a better quality of life, and that's worth paying tribute to.

Roosevelt served four terms as president of the United States, from 1933 to 1945. He is the only person in recorded history to be chosen as leader of his nation even though he could not walk or stand without help.

In 2005, *Warm Springs* was nominated for 16 Emmy Awards and won five, including Outstanding Made for Television Movie. For more information, visit www.hbo.com/films/warmsprings/. Hugh Gallagher's book, *FDR's Splendid Deception*, is available at most major book stores.