

My Story . . . by Melanie Magruder

This month, we present Melanie Magruder's story. Melanie is the co-founder of Derbytown Self-Help for Hard of Hearing People (Kentucky's First SHHH Chapter) which became Hearing Loss Association of America Kentuckiana Chapter. Without Melanie and her new found hard of hearing friends, there would be no HLAA-KY Home. Thank you Melanie!

My story of hearing loss begins early. Starting at age two, I had one ear infection after another, always in my right ear. When I had measles accompanied by a high temperature at age six, my parents began to suspect that I did not hear well. A hearing test revealed that I had essentially no hearing in my right ear, although I still had normal hearing in my left ear. The doctor theorized that the ear infections caused my hearing in my right ear to diminish, and the measles/high fever finished it off.

As a child, I was oblivious to my hearing loss. I just thought that was the way everyone heard things, and I did have one good ear. I went to regular schools with no accommodations and made good grades. I graduated from college (in the top ten percent of my class), married, and taught school for several years before starting a family.

In 1984, after being a stay-at-home mom for 12 years, I was considering returning to work. Two weeks before my 40th birthday, I realized that I was losing my hearing in my left ear as well. One day, I could hear my children talk; the next day I couldn't. Although the loss seemed sudden, my doctor said it probably had happened gradually, and I didn't really notice it until the loss reached the speech ranges. After all, if you don't hear a bird singing, you don't know it, because you don't even realize the bird is singing. If you don't hear your rocking chair creak, you don't know it, because you don't even realize that the chair creaks. But if someone is standing in front of you moving his lips and you hear no sound, THEN you realize your hearing is going.

This time, I was devastated! A hearing aid was ordered, and the wait for it to arrive seemed interminable. When I did start wearing the aid, it was difficult to get used to, and it did not help me hear nearly as much as I expected it to. I did not know how I would ever be able to deal with my family and other people or to get a job when I couldn't hear well. I didn't know a single other person with hearing loss. I had no one to turn to for guidance.

A turning point occurred for me when I picked up a magazine, "SHHH Journal," in my audiologist's office. When the audiologist noticed me reading it, he said, "Why don't you take that home with you?" It was like being thrown a lifeline. The magazine was a fountain of information about hearing loss. I immediately joined Self Help for Hard of Hearing People (SHHH), the national organization that published the magazine (it's now called "Hearing Loss Magazine"), and began receiving it bi-monthly. A short time later, I was contacted by a hard-of-hearing Louisville woman, Virginia Mason, who was just as clueless as I was about hearing loss. She was looking for people to help start a local SHHH

chapter. In December 1984, the first meeting of what would eventually be called Derbytown SHHH was held.

In 2005, the SHHH Board of Trustees voted to change the name of the national organization to Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA), and thus Derbytown SHHH became Hearing Loss Association of America –Kentuckiana (HLAK). The chapter has naturally progressed from joint commiseration to learning coping techniques to educating the public about hearing loss and, finally, to advocating for public access.

I was lucky to find this wonderful national organization so quickly and am proud to have been a co-founder and 30-year member of the Kentuckiana chapter. Hearing loss is never easy, but it would have been much harder, perhaps impossible, for me to find the job I held for 14 years before retiring and to remain involved in the hearing world without the support of my friends in HLAA - Kentuckiana.

In 2003, my hearing in my left ear took another nosedive, making me eligible for a cochlear implant. Armed with solid knowledge about the implant and, once again, the support of HLAA-K friends, I received my implant in 2005. It has made a huge difference in my life, and while it doesn't make me hear perfectly (I never knew what that was like anyway), I move smoothly between the hearing world and the world of the hard of hearing.

We can't change our hearing loss, but we can change our attitude toward it. Terry Portis, a former executive director of SHHH/HLAA, said our attitude should be "Hearing loss will not isolate me, it will not destroy my relationships or my career, and it will not keep me from living a full and meaningful life." Undoubtedly, people with hearing loss must take "the road less traveled by," but with this attitude, they can face the future confidently and without fear.

---Melanie Magruder