

HLA-NJ News and Views

A Monthly Column from The Hearing Loss Association of NJ

By Peter Yerkes, Trustee, HLA-NJ

It's a New World for People with Hearing Loss—But Much Remains To Be Done

When I was a kid in the fifties, I spent as much time as I could with my grandfather, whom I revered. I always knew when he was home, because I would hear the Red Sox game blaring from his TV long before I got to the front door. The Red Sox, and the Thursday night fights on TV - also with the volume at ear-splitting levels - were among his few diversions. At parties, and even at family meals, people often ignored this smart, funny man because he was too hard to talk to. The phone was possible, barely. He used hearing aids but they were primitive.

When it comes to help for people with hearing loss, it's not my grandfather's world any more. But as Jane Brody argued in her recent column on hearing loss in The New York Times (Jan. 16, 2012), all the advances just underscore the need to be stronger and more effective advocates for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. The best technology and support services in the world are useless if people don't take advantage of them.

Sixty years after those summer Red Sox games, my hearing is far worse than my grandfather's. I am deaf, not hard of hearing. Yet I lead a life my grandfather would have envied. As my hearing progressively worsened, starting in my 50s, I learned speech reading at the League for the Hard of Hearing in New York, now the Center for Hearing and Communication(CHC). They told me about new advances in hearing aids as soon as they hit the market. On vacations in Red Sox land, I don't miss a word of the play-by-play thanks to captions on the TV. As my hearing worsened, I fought back with cochlear implants. I benefit from captioned performances in movies and live theater, infrared in church, loops in museums...the list could go on and on. Deafness still has its trials and its humiliations, but nothing like what my grandfather experienced.

A lot to be thankful for. But Ms. Brody points out there is a lot of work to be

done. Public education, like that done by the state Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the CHC and Hearing Loss Association of New Jersey, is vital. Too many people don't know what's available. If they do, too many dismiss hearing loss as "no big deal," a normal part of aging.

Yet Ms. Brody reports that serious hearing loss is a very big deal indeed. It can lead to isolation and depression, loss of friends or work opportunities, strains on a marriage or family ties.

Like many people with hearing loss, I was leery about hearing-loss activists. Deafness was there, to be accepted. I didn't want to annoy "normal" people by asking them to speak more slowly—especially not busy, important people like doctors. The older I get, the more I understand how destructive this attitude is. On a personal level, I owe it to friends and family members to keep up with the latest advances and resist the temptation to withdraw into my books. I am resolved to check out captioning for my cellphone, and learn how to make better use of assistive listening devices in churches, movie theaters and live theaters.

We all can do more to advocate for causes such as Medicare coverage for hearing aids. We can speak up when we encounter a nursing home or a hospital, or a doctor or lawyer or other professional that treats people with hearing loss with disdain – or is ignorant of their communication needs. We can be more open about discussing our own hearing loss, more assertive in asking for help when we need it and encouraging people who need help to get it.

The other day, during one of the medical check-ups that come more frequently the older I get, the doctor noticed my cochlear implant and asked me how it worked and whether it had helped me. After we chatted for five minutes, I asked why he was so interested. His answer startled me: he said he had hearing loss, and wore a powerful high-tech aid in each ear. The devices, tiny to start with, were concealed by his fashionably long, curly hair.

It was my turn to question him. We talked about when he started to lose hearing, and how the hearing loss manifested. I couldn't help thinking that sixty years ago, he might have been looking at retirement years sitting alone in his living room, with the volume on the ball game cranked up as high as it would go.

It is indeed a new world for people with hearing loss. But there is a lot of work still to do, ranging from lobbying on behalf of Medicare coverage for hearing aids to public education to make people aware of the dangers of the “hidden disability.”

My grandfather was a wonderful man and he had, in many ways, a very happy life. I’m just sorry he didn’t live to enjoy all the help I have with hearing loss. When I think of him, I can’t help having one other regret. I also wish he had lived to see the Red Sox win the World Series.

To learn more about HLA-NJ, please contact Arlene Romoff at info@hearingloss-nj.org. We also invite you to visit www.hearingloss-nj.org, or to attend one of our local chapter meetings in Bergen, Monmouth/Ocean or Middlesex County, and our newest Morris County chapter. Dates, places and times for chapter meetings are available at www.hearingloss-nj.org