

HLA-NJ News and Views

A Monthly Column from The Hearing Loss Association of NJ

By Peter Yerkes, Trustee, HLA-NJ

Advocates Needed!

Speak Out For People With Hearing Loss

The drowsy days of summer are ending. As I write this, just before Labor Day, there is a buzz in the air as members of the Hearing Loss Association of New Jersey put final touches on this year's Walk4Hearing. It's a fun, high-energy, back-to-school kind of feeling. It also made me start to think about why so many busy people find time in jam-packed schedules for Walk4Hearing and other programs to help people with hearing loss. What makes people volunteer to give time and money and become an advocate for people with hearing loss?

(It's not too late, by the way, for you to form a team to take part in this year's Walk, on Saturday, October 13, at Mercer County Park West in West Windsor, NJ. Join a team, Walk with them, or write a check to support the Walk and other activities of HLA-NJ. As a reminder, registration starts at 9 a.m. on October 13 and the Walk begins at 10 a.m. To learn more about the Walk, or to find details of how to register or join a team, visit www.walk4hearing.org. While you are on the site, make sure you don't miss a great new video about the national Walk4Hearing program across the nation.)

In search of an answer, I decided to ask an HLA-NJ member named Karen Cartier. Like a lot of people with hearing loss, she had a problem with movies. Specifically, with the quality and consistency of captioned movies shown at her local movie theater in Bergen County. But then she took the next step, and decided to do something about it. She opened communications with the theater manager, and got others from her chapter to join her on this project. She became an advocate.

Q. Why did you decide to become an advocate?

A. Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to help others with hearing loss. As an individual with hearing loss, you get so much help from your parents, speech therapists, tutors, teachers and others. It's no fun to be on the receiving end all the time.

Q. Why do you find advocacy satisfying?

A. First of all advocacy makes me tick. It gets my adrenaline going. Second, I like working with different people, especially other individuals with hearing loss, because we have a common goal. Third, advocacy is hard work requiring small steps. It's so thrilling once you achieve these small steps.

Q. Why would you recommend advocacy to others?

A. You can make a difference to others. You make life easier or the quality of life better, for the next person with hearing loss. It's also an exciting road to conquer.

Karen could be speaking for me. Like her, I benefited from an enormous amount of help. Some of it was professional, from people at the Center for Hearing and Communication in New York (formerly the League for the Hard of Hearing) and others. But as I searched the Web for other sources of help and information, I discovered the Hearing Loss Association of New Jersey. It was – and is—a wonderful source of information and support, and a way to meet others with hearing loss.

Like Karen, though, I didn't like the feeling that I was always a taker. I wanted to try, even in a small way, to help others with hearing loss.

Taking on the role of an advocate wasn't easy. I'm no expert on hearing loss, for one thing. In addition, like a lot of people with hearing loss, I also felt uncomfortable asking for anything that seemed like special treatment. Shouldn't people with hearing loss just keep a stiff upper lip and make the best of it? A couple of things changed that attitude. I grew increasingly angry that people know so little about hearing loss and how serious it is. Second, I realized how many people with hearing loss are not getting support and information they need. They don't know about technological advances like digital hearing aids and cochlear implants, or potential life-savers such as captioned telephones. On my own, I can't do much about this. But by joining a group such as HLA-NJ and by supporting organizations such as the Center for Hearing and Communication in New York, I can do a lot. Third, like Karen, I discovered I liked getting to know other people with hearing loss, people I could get to know through HLA-NJ. So, in my own small way, I became an advocate. I spent most of my life as a reporter and editor and writing skills, I discovered, are always in demand by groups such as HLA-NJ. I think it's safe to say that anyone reading this column has useful skills of some sort. Volunteers are always needed. Becoming an advocate for people with hearing loss may sound impossibly ambitious, but it's not.

Ask Karen Cartier. Like her, you just have to be open to trying something new. Like her, you probably will find you like it. Do you have a story about advocacy you'd like to share? I'd be very interested in hearing about what led you to advocacy, or about any other aspect of hearing loss. Please contact me at p.yerkes@comcast.net. 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 from info@hearingloss-nj.org.