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Winner of the 2004
Libby Harricks Achievement Award

The Joy of Living Despite Hearing Loss

By Joan Hansen

Donna McRae's letter, informing me that I was the winner of the Libby Harricks Achievement Award for 2004, came as a great surprise and I must confess evoked an emotional response. Libby was a special person in my life, as she was in the lives of so many people. Libby was inspirational – so positive and enthusiastic – a wonderful role model and a joy to be with. I cherish especially memories of overseas conferences shared with Libby – the SHHH Convention at Stanford University in California in 1986, when my husband John and I also had the pleasure of getting to know Libby's mother Betty Heath. I was delighted that it was Betty who made the presentation to me. Travelling by train from Auckland to Wellington with Libby and three hearing impaired New Zealand friends, to attend a conference organised by the Deaf Association of New Zealand in 1991, was also a memorable experience.

As a child, I was most uncomfortable doing hearing tests at school, although sight tests did not worry me. It was not until my 20's that hearing loss became a serious problem. At first, it was confined to my right ear, but very soon afterwards my left ear deteriorated. It was otosclerosis, the hardening of bone which prevents the stapes in the middle ear from vibrating and transmitting messages to the brain. Over a period of twenty years I had five ear operations. The first was a stapedectomy on my right ear when a strut of plastic was inserted to replace the stapes. The surgeon did not consider that operation a

success. Twelve months later, when the technique had changed, he inserted a spiral of stainless steel wire in my left ear. This operation enabled me to pursue my chosen career of librarianship. Later three more operations were performed on my right ear. First of all a spiral of stainless steel was inserted, then the head of the malleus was removed and in 1980, when the technique had changed yet again, came the insertion of an ossicle, a bone from a dead person. Still no success! The surgeon, on that occasion said to have

“To have further surgery would be ‘chasing a rainbow’”

further surgery would be ‘chasing a rainbow.’ Over the years, the hearing in my left ear deteriorated and I now have a severe to profound loss in that ear, as well as a profound loss in my right ear.

Working as a Librarian with CSIRO, for over thirty years, gave me a lot of job satisfaction, although there were disadvantages. People lower their voices in library reading rooms. Working as a permanent ‘back room girl’ on cataloguing and classification would not have presented the same problems, but for me it did not have the same appeal as contact with library clientele in the reading room. I loved the challenge of tracking down obscure and seemingly inaccessible references and scientific information, the infinite variety of enquiry (and enquirer!) and the satisfaction derived from a success-

ful ‘hunt.’ As my hearing deteriorated it became increasingly difficult to cope with soft voices and difficult accents. I thought I would have to give up the work I loved so much. Four of my five operations were performed during my working life. It was operation No.2 which made my library career possible.

Lipreading was a wonderful help. I found that automatically I watched people's lips instead of their eyes. However, I decided to attend lipreading classes with the Australian Association for Better Hearing now Better Hearing Australia. This was of benefit psychologically and improved my skills. Thanks to a wonderful teacher, Olive Buzzacott, I found it a great help to supplement or consolidate what I could hear.

I still remember the agony of conferences and meetings involving large numbers of people. I hesitated to raise a subject in case it had already been covered. Parties too did not give me much joy. I tended to sit on the sidelines- observing, but not really participating very much. A self-help organisation, such as SHHH, would have changed my attitude for ‘we should not take a back seat because of our hearing loss; in the back seat we can hear even less!’ Good eyesight, a good memory and powers of observation compensated to some extent for my lack of hearing. I realised the importance of double-checking the spelling of authors' names. My staff were most helpful indicating that my phone was ringing. Provided the connection was a good one,



Joan Hansen and Betty Heath

I could just manage at that stage. However, there were embarrassing moments when I occasionally answered the wrong phone, having no sense of direction because of my unbalanced hearing. When finally I became Librarian-in-charge, some of my problems were over. Administration rather than reference work was then my main concern.

Travelling to work I avoided people. Walking from Redfern station to Sydney University grounds, the sound of voices disappeared into space. I took a different route or would 'hang back' so as not to catch up to people, especially those with soft voices. This could mean that someone else with a 'difficult' voice might catch me up! Gentlemen who insisted on walking on the outside of the footpath, unconsciously, created problems. Even twisting my head around, I just could not hear. Passing traffic complicated the situation. Conditions for lipreading were difficult.

I left the full time workforce in 1976. I then had time to indulge my interests; my passion for travel, literature, music, art and grandchildren and now, great grandchildren! I had various part-time voluntary jobs at places like the Sydney Opera House library, the local High School library, the Department of Corrective Services and, in 1984, I

became a volunteer at SHHH Information and Resource Centre, Turrumurra. I found great interest in various projects including working with Libby on the Premier's Disability Awareness Package in conjunction with the University of Sydney Community Disability and Ageing Program.

Music up until my mid 60's was a great interest and a wonderful form of relaxation. For over forty years I attended Youth concerts and the ABC Symphony concert series, as well as opera and ballet performances. Playing the piano was a great source of relaxation, particularly when I was studying years ago. In the last 15 years or so I have lost my appreciation of music, something I especially regret. Now music is no longer a pleasure, just raucous, discordant noise in my ears. The only music I now enjoy is male, unaccompanied voices. Reading, crossword puzzles (particularly the challenge of cryptic ones) and walking are my main sources of relaxation these days, providing an escape from listening fatigue.

As hearing impaired people, we may be denied some of the pleasures of life - listening to radio, the joy of communicating with children (because of difficulty hearing their voices), the interest of lectures, meetings, theatre productions

etc and the possibility of taking an active part in some aspects of life. Conversations to be comfortable frequently have to be one-to-one because of background noise. I have found great satisfaction in the wealth of exhibitions in museums and art galleries in Sydney. Language is not the sole means of communication. It has been a challenge communicating with non-English speaking people overseas. Travelling on an Italian ship from Venice to Istanbul and back only twelve of the 383 passengers spoke English!

We communicated happily by means of sign language, body language and gestures and established a good rapport with our travelling companions. Advances in technology and in medical science have made a great difference to hearing impaired people. I remember the thrill of my first experience of Sennheiser infra-red equipment in London in 1983, when we attended a play, appropriately 'Children of a Lesser God' and I was able to HEAR! I have various assistive listening devices: a hearing aid dial phone (I cannot use a Touchphone satisfactorily), Sennheiser infra-red equipment, an audio loop in my home, captioned TV, a special smoke alarm and a special doorbell. Communicating via email is very helpful too. Nevertheless there are frustrations and breakdowns in communication in one's daily life. Hearing impairment does affect relationships. As Helen Keller said, 'deafness cuts you off from people, blindness cuts you off from things.' A sense of humour is an asset, when misunderstandings arise.

I value the great psychological benefits of SHHH membership. Friendship and fellowship at meetings, especially at the Epping SHHH Group over twenty years, visiting other SHHH groups with people who also cope with the frustration and embarrassment of hearing impairment, have enriched my life immeasurably. I

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guess I could say that I have experienced the joy of living BECAUSE of hearing impairment, not just IN SPITE of hearing impairment.

I was fortunate to have a supportive husband John, who attended two overseas conferences with me in America and in Switzerland, where we also visited the Phonak factory. He came with me to the Canadian Hearing Society in Toronto, as well as Better Hearing Australia and the H.E.A.R Service in Melbourne. He was a wonderful help keeping me in touch with conversations at social functions. I have appreciated the understanding of family and friends also.

Finally, I will be forever grateful to Mary Sparke who had the vision and took the initiative to establish SHHH in Australia.