

Why I Like the HLAA Rochester Chapter

BY CARLA BEYER-SMOLIN

What makes a successful HLAA Chapter? I was invited by the Rochester Chapter to their February online meeting. The Rochester Chapter has been meeting for almost 40 years. The chapter has grown to be a highly organized, vibrant and successful chapter with great programs and many loyal members. During the HLAA 2019 Convention in Rochester, I saw the dedication of chapter members working together to help make the Convention a great success.

Now back to the online meeting, Why I like the Rochester Chapter. I asked the chapter members: What is it about the chapter that you like? Why do you keep coming back?

Here are some responses from the meeting:

Marlene Sutliff: I came to HLAA because I was angry and frustrated. I walked in the door and for the first time, in a long time, I was included. That was the first impression. I didn't have to sit at the back of the room and smile and not know what the heck was being talked about. I was included from the minute I walked in the door and that has not changed. And I think that a big draw for me is that we are treated as capable human beings, not helpless.

Fred Altrith: So many people don't realize, once you get a hearing aid, that doesn't solve all your problems. You're going to run into situations where you might need a little portable microphone or something where you're talking to somebody at the store.

When I first joined the chapter, I heard about the loop system and one of our members showed us how to build one; it took us a couple of meetings, but we all wound up having a neckloop and I'll tell you, that was the greatest thing that was ever done for me.

The friendship that I've gained from belonging to this chapter for a long period of time has been great. So, I just got to hang in there for a few more years to see the way we develop. (Note: Fred is 93.5 years old! The chapter is planning his 100th birthday party.)

Brian Fox: I stopped teaching because of my hearing loss and there were other things that facilitated my change

from education. But I was looking for a group because I've had hearing loss since 1979. When I got my hearing aids. When I joined the group, I got to say it was the most incredible group of people that are so intelligent and so driven and so committed to working together.

Janet McKenna: I joined HLAA in 1983 and that was because I heard Rocky Stone speak. He was a phenomenal speaker. He was at the American Library Association Convention, which was my profession at the time, and which I had to ultimately resign from because of the profundity of my hearing loss.

I came all the way from Grand Island, 170 miles round trip, because I had met the Rochester people when I was involved with committees and confirmed they were intelligent and dedicated. There's no question that HLAA saved my sanity because I was a young person who didn't know anybody else with hearing loss. There were all these old people, and then there was me. I was 35, and going down, down, down the audiogram real fast.

There was also a matter of personalities. I felt that it was worth these 170 miles back and forth to deal with folks whom I had something in common with, and that I could contribute to by participating in committees.

What made you get involved?

Barb Law: We have Sue Miller, and she asked, "Would you ever be willing to consider whatever?"

Sue has a way of getting to know everybody and she sees what their strengths are, and she tries to match the person to the task. I think it's important. You don't try to push people into something that they're really not ready for. But on the other hand, if you give them a mentor, like I had Marcia Dugan as my mentor when I was vice president and president, and she helped me so much how to lead a group and develop leadership skills. I would never have met her or so many of you had I not been talked into joining back in the 90s. I think the great thing is there's so many people from many different walks of life. We all have hearing loss in common, but we all have different sets of skills and it's a wonderful blend of people. I think we all like each other. The thing I miss

most is being able to get together without masks and having all those good refreshments and parties and things that we enjoy doing together.

Barb Rice: I feel that I missed an awful lot because I didn't find out about this organization till about five years ago and I happened to read something in the newspaper, and thought, well, that certainly would help me, because I've had trouble with hearing loss all my life. But I have to say that these are the most wonderful people. Thank you all for being a wonderful group.

Pete Fackler: I'm going to change the question a little bit, because I think Carla is trying to figure out how she can work with chapters and help them grow and sustain themselves. It is about the people. We have outstanding people. We have quality and quantity, and there's just a lot of exciting things happening.

But I think that begs the question. The question is how do you make that work? Barb Law hit the nail on the head. It's involving people. They show up on our doorstep or we learn about them, and we initiate a discussion, and Sue gets the credit. She does. She's been so effective, and we've all learned from her.

She's saying, "Would you ever consider?" She and others have been so good about accepting the answer. Some people don't want to do much. They just want to take a little niche place, and then they may grow. And it depends on our lives. Who is working and who's not?

I think there's another piece though that's really important. Some of this group, Carla — this is like a full-time job. It fills the day. There is so much work.

So that's an issue in terms of growing, sustaining, developing, carrying it on. It has required people who want to and can really devote the time that's needed, as well as the inspiration and all that.

Michelle Gross: Well, actually I've thought about this, and I can give some practical input.

Hearing people see you wear hearing aids and they don't want to say anything, but here, people jump right in. We're always looking forward. We're looking to be more inclusive, which feels very worthwhile. We welcome newcomers and discuss their hearing loss.

Sue has a very unique ability to find a person's interest and hone in on that. She and all of us can accept a "no." So, if somebody says no, you're not hammered, you're not badgered. Instead, you're encouraged. People are encouraged to come to any committee meeting. They don't have to join. People don't want commitments and they're afraid of them. You're told you can come, just see

what it's like. If you like it, fine. You don't have to do anything. You don't have to participate and before you know it, you're with a group of like-minded people and you can't wait to do something. You take on a small task and the next thing you know, you're taking on another task and another.

The other thing is that also a function that Sue has done and others to a little bit lesser extent, Sue belonged to every committee, and if you look at our table of organization, we have many of them.

She devoted herself to that, and that allowed for good communication among committees, because that often doesn't happen, and when you have a group with a lot of committees, you could be working at cross purposes, or two or three committees are working on the same thing.

This way there is good communication, so solving that communication issue of how one group communicates with another, maybe it's through a board, needs to be addressed.

If you're a small group, you can't do everything, so you work toward a common goal.

The other thing is there isn't any back biting in the chapter. Like everybody else, we all have our personalities, and some of us are easier to get along with than others. But that's taken into consideration. Everybody's treated well. Everybody's treated fairly. We're not talking about people behind their back. You approach somebody by getting to know them and getting to know how to work with them, rather than fighting or talking about them.

So, I think all of those things make people feel welcome and productive and not put upon.

Bruce Nelson: You need to find the right leadership, and to have deep leadership. You need to find people who know how to lead a group. When the newsletter needed an editor, Sue asked, can you do one issue? Now I'm doing my 18th.

Sue Miller: When we first started, and many of you probably don't realize, when we first started, instantly we had someone leave, but then we also had a vice president, and I can still remember the expression on Vern [Thayer's] face when we were writing the bylaws.

He said, "I know the vice president is really the president-elect." From the very beginning, we had a vice president who would go on — you could serve for, initially it was only one year and then it went for two years. The vice president was being groomed to move on up. So, we've always had a series of vice presidents, and then other people waiting in the wings who were good leaders.

Do you think that one of the key things that this chapter has had is that you socialize with each other and get together? Your chapter has a long history together. You're almost like a second family.

Art Maurer: I just wanted to say that there's one other quality that Sue has, and some other folks who are involved have, and it's persistence. They don't give up, and so even when Sue says would you ever consider, and you say never, she will still come back around a year or so later and say maybe you can do that now.

The thing about socializing, that's one thing I worry about in our now era of Zoom, because we aren't getting together interpersonally as much as we did. So as soon as we can, we want to get more things going. We're planning our annual dinner. We have a summer picnic. It's getting together and rubbing elbows that's so important in this organization.

Bob Slocum: What brought me to the meeting was a little flyer. My wife, Trudi, who tolerates my hearing loss, said let's go see what's happening. We walked in, we were attacked by this woman, this blond, named Sue Miller, shaking our hand, saying welcome, welcome.

After about two years, she asked, "Would you like to volunteer to take care of our information phone line?"

So, we've been doing that, and actually we have a member from Colorado and they became a member because of that line. What happened is she had hearing loss and she saw one of our Zoom sessions, and called the help line. I contacted her, not knowing where she was from. and told her to come to the meeting and become a member. She replied that she was from Denver, Colorado, and that she sent her membership money to Rochester. It's really nice helping people.

Also, it's great to be able to call on other members of the group, who have much more information or understanding or capabilities who were willing to take questions and talk to people.

Sue Miller: Everyone is a team member. It's a team effort. **HL**

You can watch the video replay of this meeting on YouTube at youtu.be/6Es5y5xkucw.

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