

*I look nothing like
Lois Lane, but I was
saved by Superman!
And today, like DC Comics'
legendary Man of Steel,
I am also a superhero,
the realization of a
lifelong dream.*

*Believe it or not,
I have my adult-
onset hearing
loss to thank
for this.*

*But as with any
superhero's story,
we must begin with...
an origin!*



**Hearing Loss
Association
of America**

By Michael Eury

Who He Is and How He Came to Be

I was not rocketed to Earth from a dying planet, nor have I been mutated by radiation (at least not to my knowledge). Instead, I was born in Concord, North Carolina, and grew up during the 1960s, the tumultuous decade when Americans wrestled with the ugliness of real-world crises by ducking for cover inside fantasy realms of bubble-gum music, flashy pop-culture heroes, and cornball comedies.

On January 12, 1966, my life was forever changed when, as an impressionable third grader, I watched the first episode of ABC-TV's *Batman*. My parents cackled when Adam West as Batman shimmed the "Batusti" on a dance floor, having been drugged by Molly (Jill St. John), the girlfriend of the Riddler (Frank Gorshin). In my young mind I thought my parents

to turn him into the Elongated Man, and on the backwards Bizarro World, Bizarros said "goodbye" when they meant "hello."

I learned to appreciate the "camp" humor of TV's *Batman*, but never outgrew my love of superheroes. Throughout adolescence I trekked each week to newsstands and convenience stores, searching for new "funnybooks."

I also wrote and drew my own comic books, crudely penciled on typing paper and hand-lettered in ballpoint ink and shared with fellow students. My comics starred my classmates as superheroes, their superpowers usually based upon a sophomoric nickname or trait.

The kid with a long neck ("Weasel") became Weaselman, with the power to stretch his neck great distances, and a buddy renowned for hurling spit wads at classroom clocks became Wonder Wad! These and other home-grown superheroes (I couldn't draw girls, so there were no superheroines)

experience happened: my first viewing of *Superman: The Movie*, starring Christopher Reeve, whose likable portrayal of the Last Son of Krypton convinced millions that "You'll believe a man can fly." I saw *Superman* multiple times. Reeve as *Superman* became my hero.

I graduated from ECU in 1980 and took a job teaching middle and high school band in eastern North Carolina. And I hated it. I had blundered into the wrong career. I taught for only a semester, quitting and returning home. During the early 1980s I worked as a substitute teacher, cable-access TV cameraman and talent, record and video stores



How My Hearing Loss Made Me a

Superhero!

were suffering from some type of dementia—couldn't they see that *Batman* was in peril?

Mom and Dad, *Batman*'s acting weird because he was slipped a mickey by Molly. There's nothing funny about this!! What's wrong with you people?!

Batman in 1966 opened a gateway to other superheroes and I became a voracious reader of comic books, learning the lore of *Superman*, the Justice League of America, *Spider-Man*, and the *Fantastic Four*. Ask me to calculate a percentage or name the capital of Kansas and I'd respond with a blank stare, but I could tell you without hesitation that *Gingold* was the name of the serum consumed by *Ralph Dibny*

occasionally banded together as the *Concord Crusaders*.

As graduation approached, in my heart I wanted to study creative writing and art and become a professional comic book writer/artist, but played it safe by opting for Plan B: becoming a band director. Music was my other passion, and I played trombone in every ensemble available. And thus, in fall 1975, I became a music education major at East Carolina University (ECU). Throughout college, however, I continued to read comic books.

Look! Up in the Sky!

I was at ECU in December 1978 when another life-altering superhero

clerk, graveyard shift convenience store clerk, singing telegrams messenger, comedy-improv group performer, and freelance writer for small press publications and community newspapers. I was able to leap from one dead-end job to another in a single bound!

My one success during this period of instability was finding the love of my life, *Rose*. We met in 1984 as co-workers at *Monkey Business Singing Telegrams* in Charlotte, North Carolina, and had an instant chemistry. After a year and half of dodging our feelings for each other, in January 1986 we could no longer ignore what

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Superhero! *continued from page 9*

was intended to be and have since lived happily ever after.

Throughout my mid-twenties, Superman begat movie sequels, and my obsession deepened. I even nurtured fantasies about being Superman! I dreamt of flying to the rescue of those in need. Inspired by the examples of superheroes, I had an innate desire to do good for others but lacked the maturity to cultivate a pragmatic way of realizing that desire.

My Own Private Kryptonite

A hero is generally defined by his archenemy. As I aged into my thirties, a supervillain conspired to topple me. My foe did not operate from a subterranean lair, nor did he hire underlings with henchmen names embroidered on their sweatshirts.

Instead, this insidious mastermind quietly employed covert tactics. He began his assault as an embezzler, secreting away sounds—a consonant here, a high pitch there. He sometimes brandished weapons of mass destruction—otosclerosis, tinnitus, and noise exposure. His attacks, however, were gradual and unannounced, allowing me to make minor lifestyle adjustments along the way. I did not realize—until it was too late!—the havoc he had wreaked. The name of this scoundrel? Hearing loss.

In January 1988 my long-time passion for comic books finally

blossomed into a vocation. I took a job as an assistant editor at a small publisher called Comico the Comic Company, in Norristown, Pennsylvania. It was here that I was first bothered by hearing problems, especially in restaurants, where I learned to position myself with my “good ear” facing the table’s conversation.

In the summer of 1989 I landed my dream job: I became an editor at DC Comics, the publisher of *Superman* and *Batman*. DC Comics, headquartered in midtown Manhattan, was a subsidiary of Warner Bros. Living in the Big Apple and working for an entertainment empire was an exhilarating experience for this small-town southern boy!

Within eight months I had been promoted to editorial management, working as the assistant to Vice President/Editorial Director Dick Giordano, and seemed to be on the fast track. A few freelancers called me the “heir apparent” of the editorial department, the “guy to get to know.” (An aside about my boss: Dick, coincidentally, was profoundly hard of hearing. We often held private conversations in the elevator so I could speak loudly enough for him to understand me without being overheard by editors loitering outside his office door.)

I began having difficulties processing information. When people would speak to me while I was on the phone, their comments, heard through my “bad ear,” were muffled.

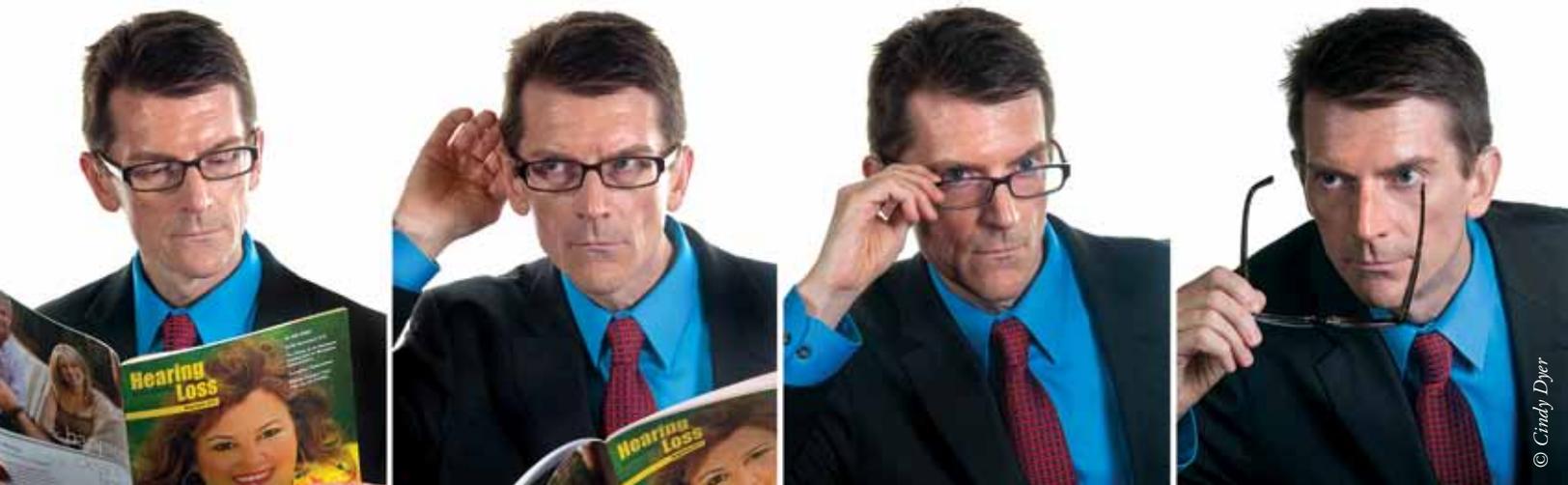
DC’s president had a high-pitched, soft voice, and I rarely understood what she said. I began to mishear in editorial meetings, and some colleagues questioned my competence or sobriety. A few editors still stinging from my promotion took advantage of my unsteadiness and bullied me. My self-confidence, along with my hearing, was fading away.

Of course, a true hero would rise above such adversity. I was not heroic in any way. I allowed my progressive hearing loss to crush my spirit, and the bullies and professional stress to make me miserable. Three years after taking my dream job, I resigned from it and slunk back home to be a freelance writer of comic books, a job I could do without having to rely upon my failing hearing.

Trapped in the Phantom Zone

Rose and I spent the summer of 1992 in New Bern, North Carolina, in a house my grandfather had built decades earlier. The house was in disrepair, souring my disposition, and culture shock also waylaid me. I was extremely unhappy and anxious to retreat.

That fall we moved—again!—to Philadelphia, to familiar territory and friends. I was depressed, however, although I usually put on a happy face to friends, keeping most folks at arm’s length. My depression adversely affected my work, and writing assignments withered away. I accepted an



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editorial position at Dark Horse Comics in the Portland, Oregon, suburb of Milwaukie, and, in August 1993, Rose and I moved from the East to the West Coast.

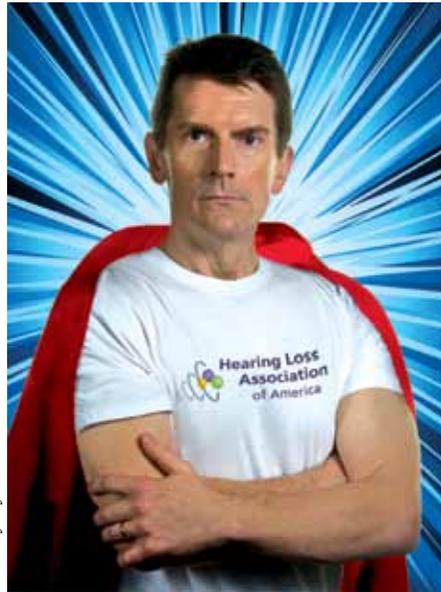
Once again in an office environment, the pattern from my DC Comics job replayed itself. I was quickly promoted into management, becoming a “group editor” (overseeing an entire line of titles and staff), but fell prey to communication breakdowns. Some editors considered me aloof because I didn’t hang out with them, or rude because I sometimes didn’t answer when they addressed me from a distance or from behind. The day that one of Dark Horse’s executives—a low-talker—mumbled a question that I answered inappropriately, earning a bewildered gape from him; I realized that I could no longer deny my problem.

In spring 1994 I visited an audiologist, had a hearing test, was diagnosed with otosclerosis, and acquired an analog full-shell hearing aid for my right ear. This helped me hear some of the things I had been missing, but did not cure my depression. Actually, I choked on self-pity when I first wore the aid, whining that I was going deaf and would one day be left with nothing but that incessant ringing (tinnitus) in my ears!

I was also having difficulty modulating the volume of my voice. Sometimes I’d speak too loudly, and sometimes, too softly. I remember being at a gathering in a noisy Portland nightclub and greeting an old friend from behind. He didn’t hear me, I was speaking so softly. I repeated myself and it wasn’t until he saw me that he noticed I was there. He called me “the Invisible Man.” While I’d wanted a superpower, invisibility wasn’t it.

On May 27, 1995, my hero, Christopher Reeve, had a horseback-riding accident that left him a quadriplegic, forever banishing him to a wheelchair. Through the support of his family, he “stood tall” as an advocate for people with spinal cord injuries.

What an inspiration he was! Reeve truly became a superman.



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That was my life—not taking ownership of my hearing loss, not learning how to cope with it. I had become a pale imitation of the person I was before I lost my hearing. And then Superman came to my rescue!

While I was impressed, I wasn’t prompted to fully address my own disability. In the fall of 1995, I resigned from my staff job and once again retreated into the quiet world of freelance writing.

My hearing loss worsened, and so did my attitude. I was also aging out of comics, finding less and less work. I came close to breaking into writing for animation, but that was predicated upon relocating to Los Angeles, a move my wife and I considered ill-advised.

By the late 1990s, I felt that I was a failure and rarely connected with others. I continued to reside in Oregon, more than 3,000 miles away from family and old friends who didn’t have to witness my shortcomings.

And I was drowning in despair about my hearing loss. I blamed God for it—hearing is one of our vital senses, and, like air, should always be there, right? At least that was my

thinking at the time. At my lowest, I took my Bible—the same Bible I had studied for years, one that was saturated with yellow-highlighted passages—and chucked it into the trash can. I reasoned that God had forsaken me by allowing my hearing to pull a vanishing act, so this was my way of returning the “favor.”

Summoned into Action

In 1999, I took a part-time job as a clerk at a small community-based corporation in Lake Oswego, Oregon, where Rose and I had settled.

My hearing worsened. My job involved dealing with the public, and some folks had little patience for someone with a disability. I remember one woman rudely biting my head off after my mishearing of a name.

Still, I began to regain some confidence and became the part-time communications director of this organization. I started wearing two in-the-canal digital hearing aids, which I purchased in 2001 once my single analog was no longer cutting it.

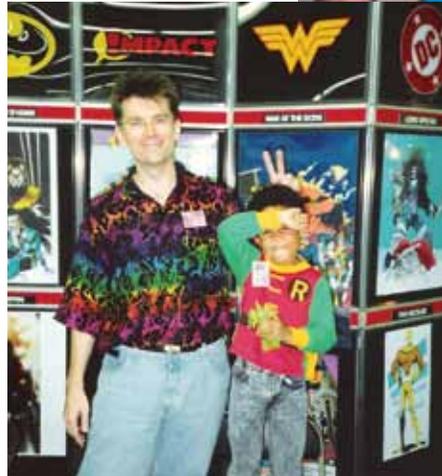
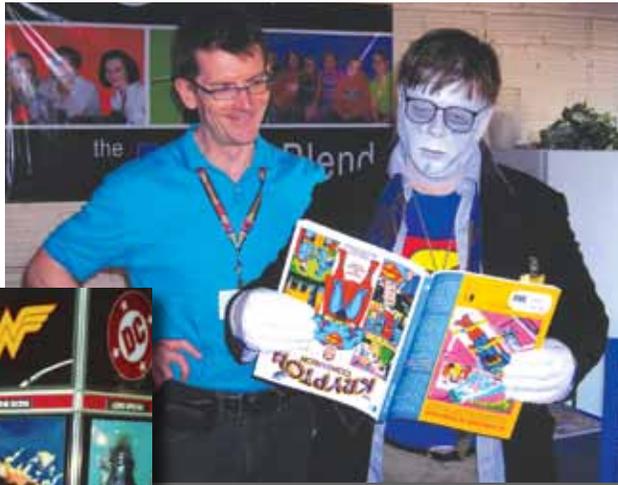
I also inched my way back into publishing, in 2002 producing my first book, the history of a collectible toy. Another book followed the next year. My publisher offered me the opportunity to edit a start-up magazine that would examine comic books and related media of the 1970s and 1980s.

In summer 2003 I became a full-time freelance writer and editor with no shortage of work. Professionally, things were looking up, but I worked from my Fortress of Solitude, limiting my face-to-face contact with others. Hearing loss had become my kryptonite, and I was embarrassed by my condition. I grew my hair long to conceal my hearing aids.

Online I discovered SHHH—Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, the original name of the Hearing Loss Association of America. There was a chapter in Lake Oswego, and one in Portland. I marked their meeting dates in my calendar and swore I’d attend. But when these dates would roll around, I’d find an excuse not to go.

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Right: Superman's backwards duplicate, "Bizarro," enjoys my book, *The Krypton Companion*, at the 2008 Superman Celebration in Metropolis, Illinois. Actually, being Bizarro, he hates it!



Left: My last promotional appearance as a DC Comics editor occurred at Charlotte's HeroesCon in June 1992. My hearing loss was adversely affecting my career at this point. With me is my young friend, Robyn Johnson.

Right: An after-hours gathering at the HLAA Leadership Conference in Bethesda, Maryland, in October 2010.

Left to right: Brenda Neubeck, Kim Henney, Michael Eury, and Rose Rummel-Eury



Left: The Executive Committee of the Hearing Loss Association of North Carolina at the 2009 HLAA Convention. Seated: Julie Bishop, vice president, and Joyce Adler, secretary; Standing: Michael Eury, president, and Deborah Stroud, treasurer

Superhero! *continued from page 11*

That was my life—not taking ownership of my hearing loss, not learning how to cope with it. I had become a pale imitation of the person I was before I lost my hearing.

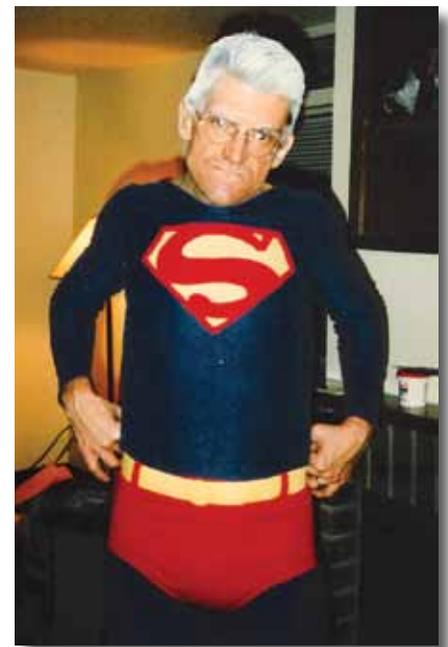
And then Superman came to my rescue!

Christopher Reeve died on October 10, 2004, nine years after his debilitating injury.

Reeve's death affected me deeply. I'd never met the man, but it was like I had lost a close friend or brother. Then my grief morphed into something else ... a sensation of peace, and of empowerment.

I firmly believe that God used Christopher Reeve as an "angel" to send me a message about dealing with my hearing loss. At that transformational moment, I stopped bellyaching, "Why me?" but instead pondered the question, "What do I do next?"

The answer to my question led me to the next meeting of the Clackamas County, Oregon, SHHH Chapter, which happened to be a hearing resource fair held at the Chapter's meeting site at the Lake Oswego Senior Center. I learned a great deal



Faster than a feeding gullet! Able to get out of his chair with minimal grunting! It's Michael as "Old Superman," on Halloween 1996.

Professionally, things were looking up, but I worked from my Fortress of Solitude, limiting my face-to-face contact with others. Hearing loss had become my kryptonite, and I was embarrassed by my condition. I grew my hair long to conceal my hearing aids.

about assistive listening devices; was inspired by a speech by David Viers, then the Oregon state president of SHHH (and who soon became my friend); and met other people like me! At the end of the meeting I asked the program director, Ed Larson, if I could join the chapter—I thought I might be too young, since most of the others in the room had gray hair! Not only did he say yes, he recruited me to replace him as program director, since he was moving into a retirement village in a different city. Ed detected a fire within me that I had thought long extinguished.

At the next chapter meeting, Ed introduced me to the group as a “god-send.” I dismissed that remark, but now realize that I was sent there for a higher purpose. I knew absolutely nothing about shaping programs for people with hearing loss—my motivation was initially one individual’s search for information—but having been thrown into the deep end, this time, unlike my previous challenges, I did not quit. The questions I had about hearing loss became program topics, and through curiosity and the help of other SHHH leaders and professionals, I made contacts and booked speakers.

And there I learned a lesson that has since enriched my life: helping people is the path to happiness. As program director, and later president, of that chapter, I was able to console and guide many who felt marginalized by their hearing loss.

Before long I joined the Oregon SHHH (and later, HLAA, post-name change) Board of Trustees and edited the statewide newsletter. After Rose and I decided to return home to North

Carolina in September 2007, I became an at-large member of the Board of Trustees of the Hearing Loss Association of North Carolina and the editor of its statewide newsletter. In 2008 I was elected state president, an office I am honored to maintain today.

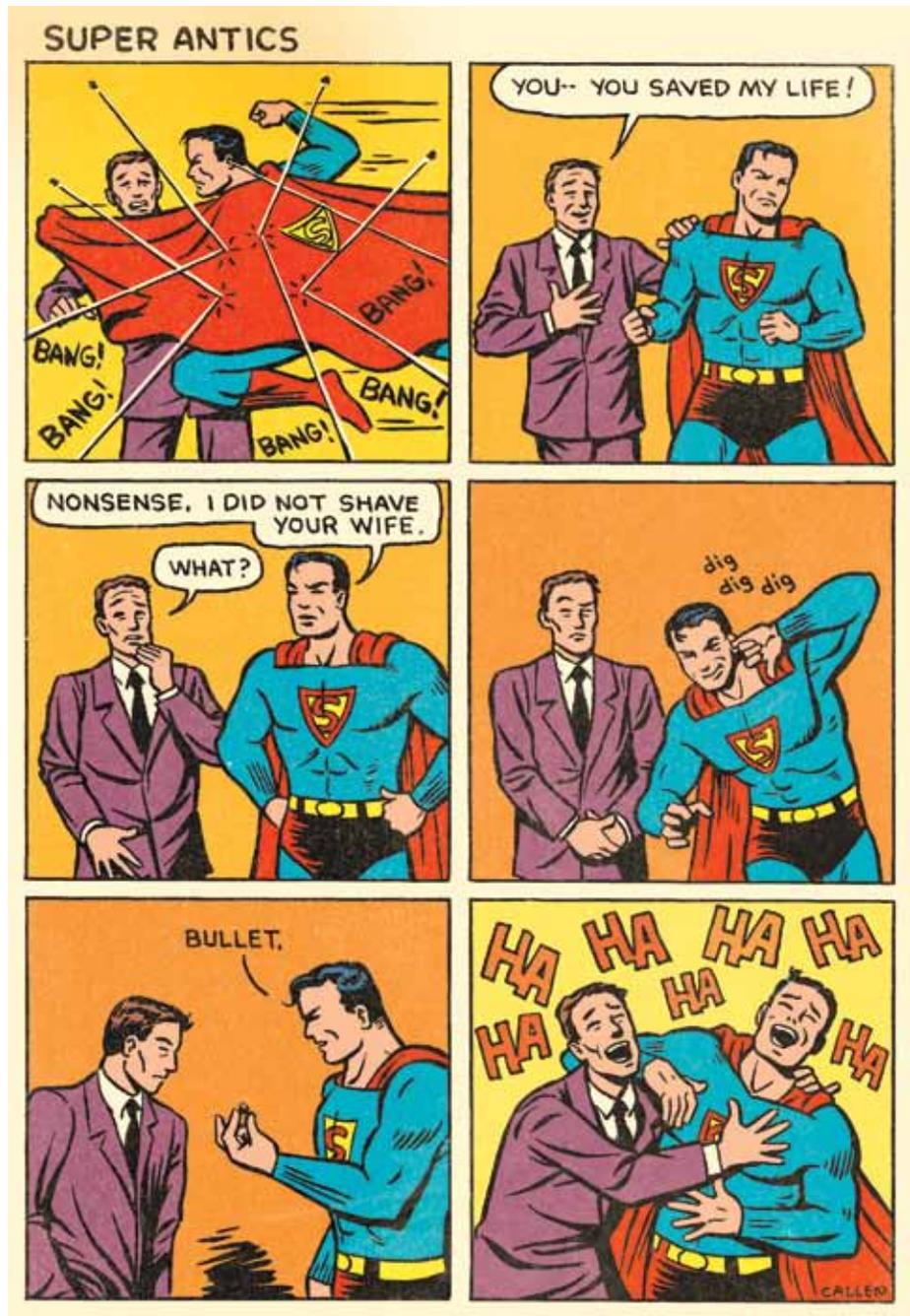
Wanted: More Superheroes!

So how does this make me a superhero? A superhero is someone who does not

give up, no matter the odds, and who does what he or she can to help others.

Christopher Reeve certainly could have hidden from the spotlight after his accident. The man could not breathe without a respirator, yet he rose above his bodily prison to show us all that you don’t have to be “more powerful than a locomotive” to be a Man of Steel.

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This Superman take-off, “Super-Antics,” by cartoonist Kerry Callen (kerrycallen.blogspot.com), shows that even a Man of Steel occasionally mishears! Superman™ DC Comics. Used with permission.

Superhero! *continued from page 13*

My conversion from a self-pitying introvert with hearing loss to a self-confident extrovert with hearing loss opened other doors for me. While I was looking for a community-service project, fate led me to accept a part-time job as executive director of my county's historical nonprofit organization. I was concerned that my hearing loss might once again work against me, but my wonderful wife encouraged me to move forward.

And I'm so happy I did! My hearing loss has created an occasional hurdle, but I'm now in my fourth year overseeing the preservation of my community's heritage. From young adults to veterans to senior citizens, I'm routinely showered with gratitude from people who are thrilled that I care about their past. My job has also led me to volunteer with civic organizations such as the Rotary Club, the public library, and my church.

You see, this is my superpower: community service. While I may be painting a portrait of altruism here, I admit that there remains a hint of selfishness behind my motivation: Nothing I've ever done before has made me feel so good!

Not long ago, I created for HLA-NC a leadership program called "Invisible No More," which encourages people with hearing loss to stop hiding their condition. This program has been shared with national leaders and is available on the HLAA website. An important component of "Invisible No More" is the contention that it is the moral imperative of HLAA leaders to help others who have yet to reach our level of confidence or enlightenment.

And so, I invite you to become a superhero, too. Be proud of who you are. Seek guidance and resources to help you communicate and participate in life. Do not give up, no matter how insurmountable the odds may seem.

You may not be able to "leap tall buildings in a single bound," but you will soar to new heights. This, I promise you—and you know Superman would never tell a lie! **HTH**

Michael Eury wears binocular hearing aids and has been a member of HLAA since 2005. He is the state president of HLA-NC and is a 2011 recipient of the Spirit of HLAA Award. He lives in Concord, North Carolina, with his wife, Rose, who has loyally stood by his side during his journey through life with hearing loss. Contact Michael at euryman@gmail.com and visit HLA-NC's website at nchearingloss.org.



Books by Michael Eury

Michael is the editor of *Back Issue*, a comics history magazine published eight times a year by TwoMorrows Publishing of Raleigh, North Carolina (www.twomorrows.com). *Back Issue* premiered in November 2003.

Images of America: Concord (Arcadia Publishing, 2011)

Captain Action: The Original Super-Hero Action Figure: Revised Second Edition (TwoMorrows, 2009)

The Batcave Companion (with co-writer Michael Kronenberg) (TwoMorrows, 2009)

Adventures of the Mask Omnibus (Dark Horse Comics, 2009)

Comics Gone Ape: The Missing Link to Primates in Comics (TwoMorrows, 2007)

The Krypton Companion (TwoMorrows, 2006)

The Supervillain Book (with co-editor Gina Misiroglu) (Visible Ink, 2006)

The Justice League Companion (TwoMorrows, 2005)

Bugs Bunny: What's Up, Doc? (contributing writer) (DC Comics, 2005)

Daffy Duck: You're Despicable! (contributing writer) (DC Comics, 2005)

The Superhero Book: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Comic-Book Icons and Hollywood Heroes (contributing writer) (Visible Ink, 2004)

Dick Giordano: Changing Comics, One Day At a Time (TwoMorrows, 2003)

Captain Action: The Original Super-Hero Action Figure (TwoMorrows, 2002)

