

By Shelby Hersey

# When the Student Becomes the Teacher

I was born in 1991 with a bilateral, sensorineural hearing loss. I wasn't diagnosed until I was almost three years old, which is also when I got my first hearing aids. By then my hearing loss was already moderate-to-moderately severe but progressed to severe-to-profound within a few years.

I am the only one in my family with hearing loss, and like most parents mine were shocked and upset when they found out. They had so many questions but no idea what to do or where to turn. What type of amplification would I need? What mode of communication would I use? What school placement options were there?

Luckily, my parents had a friend who was married to a woman who was deaf, who also happened to be an advocate for the deaf. With her guidance they were able to better understand what support and accommodations I could expect to receive in school.

## The Education Journey

I started school not long after my diagnosis. I went to Camelot Elementary School in Annandale, Virginia from preschool through fifth grade. Camelot was not the designated elementary school for my neighborhood but my parents decided to send me there because it had an oral program for deaf and hard of hearing students.

There were about nine students in my class. I grew up with most of them since we were in the same class each year. Back in "those days" we wore ugly blue chest harnesses that carried a box (the receiver) with wires that connected to our hearing aids while our teachers wore the microphone. Oh, the joy of running around with the harness, the receiver bouncing up and down, and our arms getting tangled in the wires. Thank goodness we live in a wireless world now!

The students with hearing loss were in a self-contained classroom. We all stayed together through the fourth grade,



but in fifth grade some of us entered the mainstream general education classes, which proved to be a very successful year.

Because of that experience my parents and I decided that I was ready to start attending my designated neighborhood school in the sixth grade. This is also when I started receiving services from an itinerant teacher (one who travels from school to school) for deaf and hard of hearing students.

What a life-changer! I had no idea I was so "different" until that year. I went from being just like everyone else in my class to being the only one in my whole school with hearing loss. Thank goodness

by that time we had wireless assistive listening devices (ALDs)! The sixth grade was a challenging year, especially since I was a shy student. That's when I started to hide my hearing loss.

Then came middle school. I felt even more alone, since I was still the only one with a hearing loss. All through middle school and high school, I wore my hair down so no one could see my hearing aids. I did not advocate for myself when I should have and I did everything possible to hide my hearing loss.

## Graduating From Student to Teacher

I made it through high school and decided that I wanted to help other students who are going through the same things I went through. In 2013 I graduated from Radford University in Virginia with a degree in Deaf Education and started my career as an itinerant teacher for deaf and hard of hearing students! This fall marked the beginning of my fourth year teaching.

A lot has changed since my middle and high school years. Back then I was the polar opposite of a self-advocate, and I disliked working with my itinerant teachers. But I've made a complete turnaround. I now teach about self-advocacy and have become the same teacher I didn't like years ago.

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Above: Shelby and fiancé Patrick with Parker © Emily Howell

I now understand the importance of coming to terms with your hearing loss, being a good self-advocate, learning about your rights, and knowing how to educate others about hearing loss. I work with students of all ages, and I am able to say to them, "I've been in your shoes; I know how you feel."

It's easier to develop a good rapport with my students when I tell them I have a hearing loss, that I received the same services I am providing them, that I wear two hearing aids, and that I used to try to hide my hearing loss in school. I am able to use my experiences to help teach them about self-advocacy in the classroom, in the community, and in life after high school, especially in college and in the working world.

I start working with my students at the very beginning of the school year. They are already feeling overwhelmed in the first week by such things as looking for classes, meeting teachers, making new friends and making sure they have all the materials they need. So how do they find time to tell teachers they have a hearing loss? Not only that, but also to discuss accommodations or any other needs they might have, such as ALD, how to use the equipment, or services they might receive. On top of that, what if a student is also one who hides his or her hearing loss?

I have found if I can encourage my students to be the ones to let teachers know about their hearing loss and needs, they become more confident, and also develop a better

relationship with their teachers. I have several strategies I use to help them do this. One that I love is to have the student make a PowerPoint presentation that explains everything teachers need to know about their hearing loss.

The feedback we get from teachers is always very positive. They love hearing directly from the student, instead of from me, their case manager, audiologist, or other member of the IEP (Individualized Education Program) team.

When students start the school year off by advocating for themselves it builds their confidence and helps them develop stronger relationships with others. We must always continue to teach self-advocacy, push and encourage our students, and educate others! **HLM**

*Shelby Hersey is in her fourth year as an itinerant teacher for deaf and hard of hearing students (pre-K through 12). She spent two years with Prince William County Schools and is now in her second year with Fairfax County Schools, both in northern Virginia. Shelby has a B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Education from Radford University. She is currently taking classes to become certified in American Sign Language (ASL) Studies. When she is not working or taking classes, Shelby is either planning for her upcoming wedding to Patrick or spoiling her German Shepherd puppy, Parker. You can contact Shelby at slhersey@fcps.edu.*



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