

Excitement, Connection and Influence

BY BARBARA KELLEY

John W. Gardner, founder of the grassroots lobby group Common Cause—and who introduced Medicare as the secretary of what was then the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare under President Lyndon Johnson—was a friend of our founder, Rocky Stone. When Rocky was thinking of forming HLAA (then known as Self Help for Hard of Hearing People), Gardner said that organizing people who are hard of hearing was going to be hard to do.

I wasn't there at the time and hardly know what Gardner meant, but if I take what he said at face value, he was wrong. Putting aside all the positive public policy changes HLAA has been involved in, Gardner might not have realized the strong will of people who want to find others like themselves and enjoy being together. This was evident at the HLAA2019 Convention.

The last century was drastically different from now. Back then, when someone found out he or she had a hearing loss, it was like a death sentence. There was no place to turn if you weren't totally deaf yet didn't hear well. Today, not only is there HLAA with the focus on staying in the hearing world with any option available, but people are more tuned into well-being, self-care, and living their best and fittest lives at all ages, despite any health issues.

Medicine has come far. So has technology. People who associate with HLAA come to a convention, attend a chapter meeting, participate in the Walk4Hearing and want the pleasure of being with others like themselves who understand what it's like not to hear well. They embrace good health and life's joys. Rocky always said, "We are people first who just happen to have hearing loss."

The New Generation

We had a handful of young adults at this year's convention who have the same desire to be with others with hearing loss and to live their lives like every other young person—with hopes and dreams for college, career and fulfilling social lives. Everyone has challenges that shouldn't be sugarcoated. But people associated with HLAA have an attitude that says we can do something about our hearing loss and live well in spite of it. It doesn't matter if you're a teen, young adult, young at heart, midcareer or enjoying your older years.

I asked our youngest attendee to explain her first experience at an HLAA Convention. Kierstyn "Kiki" Kuehnle, 15, received the 2019 HLAA Outstanding Young Adult Award. Kiki was born with a hearing loss in her left ear. But it wasn't until she was a young teen that she started learning about hearing loss and became a force in her community. She found her passion with the HLAA Pennsylvania Walk4Hearing in 2016, when she was only 12 years old.



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**"Life is the art
of drawing
without an
eraser."**

—John W. Gardner



These young people got together at HLAA2019 and had a lot of fun. Front, from left: Zina Jawadi, Kiki Kuehnle, Heather Jordan. Middle, from left: Malinda Leeds, Carrie Martin, Jocelyn Feulmer, Lauren McGrath. Back, from left: Betsy Ireland, James Macklin.

each other. There were ideas on how to spread awareness within our chapters and communities. Most of all, I was honored to receive the 2019 HLAA Outstanding Young Adult Award. I was so proud to have my family there so they could finally see and connect more with members of the community of which I am part of. Whatever age you are, whatever challenge you have, you can do anything you set your mind to.”

There are many ways to take HLAA along with you on your hearing journey. Find us on Facebook and Twitter, join

an HLAA Chapter, go to a Walk4Hearing, subscribe to our free online *Hearing Life e-News*, join HLAA and receive this magazine. Think about coming to an HLAA Convention. We’re in New Orleans next year. It might make a great vacation. In the words of Board Member Peggy Ellertsen, an HLAA Convention is like “hearing loss camp.” And, remembering my camp days growing up at Camp Glinodo on Lake Erie, the camp experience meant seeing old friends, making new ones, sharing stories, finding common ground and having fun the whole time. You always went home exhausted but rejuvenated and feeling better about yourself. **HL**

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In just four short years, “Team Kiki” raised nearly \$92,000. Though her fundraising was impressive and practically unmatched, this wasn’t all that made Kiki successful and memorable. Her passion for raising awareness and providing people with information about hearing loss drew people to Team Kiki, and to the Walk4Hearing. So far, nearly 150 people have walked with Kiki on her team—and with the support of her community, those numbers will surely continue to grow.

Kiki said, “Excitement, connection and influence are words I use to describe the HLAA2019 Convention. The excitement I experienced was from the pure joy of meeting more people with hearing loss. My conversations with them soared above any expectations I had coming to this convention. The connection also came from how I related to the workshop topics and speakers, and the questions from the audience. The influence came from the motivation that each attendee inspired in

“Whatever age you are, whatever challenge you have, you can do anything you set your mind to.”

—Kierstyn “Kiki” Kuehnle, 15, recipient of the 2019 HLAA Outstanding Young Adult Award