

IN MEMORIAM

# Grace Waegell Tiessen, "Our Miss Grace"

BY NANCI LINKE-ELLIS



Grace Waegell Tiessen, affectionately known as “Our Miss Grace,” passed away on March 23, 12 days shy of her 101st birthday. She passed away calmly and quietly in Pasadena, her home for 74 years. Grace Tiessen was a legendary pioneer of hearing loss causes, and had been a champion of SHHH, HLAA, and HLAA-CA for more than 30 years.

Grace was the editor of the HLAA-CA State Association newsletter, *The Hearing Loss Californian*, from 2001 to 2019. Grace was president of the HLAA (called SHHH at the time), San Gabriel Valley Chapter from 1985 to 1990. Furthermore, Grace was a member of the HLAA-CA State Board of Trustees from 1997 to 2011, where she also served as corresponding secretary (1997–1998), vice president (1999–2000), and president (2001–2002).

For decades, Grace had been deeply involved with HLAA, doing outreach, participating in Walk4Hearing, performing advocacy, attending meetings, hosting Christmas parties, and anything to help further the aims of HLAA. Grace recruited and mentored scores of young adults for HLAA. She was a role model to many.

Grace was a member of the California Department of Education Advisory Task Force for the deaf and hard of hearing; a member of the Board of Directors of the HEAR Center, a nonprofit speech and audiology center in Pasadena, from 1996 to 2007; and a member of the City of Pasadena Commission on Accessibility and Disability from 1990 to 1995. Grace was the recipient of HLAA’s 2003 Keystone Award.

Grace was born in 1919 in Sacramento, California, just one year before women were able to vote. Grace attended UC Berkeley, graduating in 1940 with a bachelor’s degree in English. Later, Grace obtained a second B.A. in Psychology from California State University of Los Angeles, then a third B.A. in Math and Computer Science. Grace worked as a software engineer for Jet Propulsion Laboratories (JPL) from age 62 to 73.

At UC Berkeley, she met and married, Leonard Edmondson, who was an artist and art professor. They had three children: a son, a daughter, and then a second son. In the 1970’s Grace took her mother’s name, Tiessen.

Grace grew up with hearing loss, started wearing two hearing aids in 1970, and later was the recipient of bilateral cochlear implants. **HL**

*Nanci Linke-Ellis was appointed HLAA Southern California Chapter Coordinator in 2010 until she retired in June 2016. She was an elected HLAA-CA trustee 2007–2009. She is a hearing loss and disability consultant to movie studios, theatres, and the film industry. She is an experienced captioning advocate and a partner of Captionfish, an entertainment deaf and hard-of-hearing source. She holds a BFA in theatre from Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. Nanci has hearing loss, uses cochlear implants, and lives in Santa Monica, California.*



# My Friend *Amazing Grace*

BY ZINA JAWADI

On June 30, 2012, a beautiful warm day, I drove to Pasadena in southern California to attend my first Los Angeles Chapter meeting of the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA), the nation's largest nonprofit organization serving people with hearing loss. At the time, I was 17 years old and would often sit by myself during lunch at school, because it was less isolating for me to eat alone than to sit in the noisy cafeteria where I could not hear anything because of my hearing loss. Five minutes after I arrived, I introduced myself to Grace, better known as Amazing Grace, a then 94-year-old woman wearing a green shirt, yoga pants, and Coach brand sneakers. Unsure how to converse with a lady more than five times my age, I complimented her on her shoes. We then started chatting about my internship at the former House Research Institute (now House Ear Institute) in Los Angeles, my volunteer experiences, and my academic pursuits. Other HLAA-Los Angeles Chapter members interrupted our conversation to either excitedly introduce themselves to me or to admire Grace's efforts as former president of the HLAA California State Association.

Two weeks later, I drove north to attend my second chapter gathering. Although my father was driving above the speed limit on the way to Simi Valley, a large car passed us on the right on the freeway. Arriving, I noticed that same large vehicle was parked—it was Grace's. She had driven more than an hour by herself to attend the event. Halfway through the meeting, Grace suddenly asked me, "Would you like to run for the HLAA-CA state board?" My jaw dropped, unsure how to respond. I thanked her for her faith in me and scheduled a time to connect with her. On the way back, Grace passed us again on the freeway, speeding back to Pasadena where she lived.

A week later, I met with Grace at her house to continue the discussion. She gave me examples of resumes of prior board applicants. My hands began to sweat when I noticed the resumes of members with 30 years of work experience, and people who had been

members of HLAA before I was even born. At the time, I could not understand why such a highly-respected woman would nominate a 17-year-old high school student for a state board. She insisted that HLAA needed younger voices like mine, but I remained incredulous. I took Grace's advice and submitted my application. To my delight I was accepted, becoming the youngest board member of any HLAA board nationwide ever. I am and will always be so humbled and grateful to have received this honor. It is ultimately because of Grace that I was able to begin my advocacy dreams that started in eighth grade—becoming active with HLAA. Eight years later, in 2020, I am serving on the HLAA Board of Directors.

I met Amazing Grace again at the 2013 HLAA Convention in Portland. This time, I spent hours with her, discovering that she is not only a dedicated advocate for a great cause, but also a brilliant, classy, and sharp woman. Grace grew up with hearing loss, which was not diagnosed until she was 50 years old. She would be one of the few female undergraduate students, let alone one with disability, at UC Berkeley, decades before the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted.

Her class was seated alphabetically, and with her last name beginning with W, Grace was regularly placed in the back of very large classrooms. She still managed to graduate, which is extraordinarily impressive. At the age of 65, wishing to be challenged more, Grace decided to study computer science, obtaining her third B.A. (this time in math and computer science), and then working as a software engineer.

Grace discovered HLAA more than 35 years ago, shortly after retiring from her engineering job, and remained very active. Grace is highly respected across HLAA locally, statewide, and nationally. After all, she attended almost every convention, served as chapter president and as HLAA-CA president, and was an active participant and team leader in the annual local Walk4Hearing, raising thousands of dollars annually. She would spend hours in Los Angeles traffic to attend HLAA-CA's full-day board meetings, even after her

board term finished. For 18 years starting in 2000, Grace served as editor of the HLAA-CA newsletter, *The Hearing Californian*, which was mailed to thousands of individuals across California every three months. She edited the newsletter, expanded membership, fundraised, and solicited and signed up advertisers. Grace was extremely passionate about hearing accessibility. In the words of Grace, “I live in Pasadena, and they say that we have a very accessible city. But it’s not true. It’s totally inaccessible to people with hearing loss.”

Although I do not live in southern California, over the years, I seized any opportunity to see Grace in Los Angeles, HLAA-CA board meetings, and HLAA conventions. We had a reputation of being, at the time, the oldest and youngest HLAA members in California, and possibly across the nation. Amazing Grace may have been the oldest member, but her energy was exhilaratingly youthful. Grace managed to find time to go to the gym several times a week. A highly intellectual lady, Amazing Grace constantly had a facial expression of curiosity, advocated for underrepresented groups, and demonstrated for social causes.

I most admire Grace’s dauntlessness, wit, dedication, and faith in others. She changed the lives of so many people, including mine. She believed in my potential as a young person with hearing loss, and tirelessly served as my mentor for years. She had also greatly contributed to the hearing loss community. Grace is one of my greatest friends, and I love and care for her deeply.

Amazing Grace was determined to turn 100, and she did. In fact, the first time she gave me an invitation to her 100th birthday party (April 4, 2019) was seven years earlier in the summer of 2012. Although I could not attend Grace’s party, I did visit her on August 22, 2019 during a short trip to LA. She met me at her front door and led me to her office, which had photos of her family’s farm in Sacramento, collections of meaningful items such as petitions and socially progressive books, and several large computer monitors. Grace’s office was more technologically advanced than mine.

I asked how she was since fully retiring from doing the HLAA-CA newsletter in 2018. For the first time in her life, Grace was truly retired. She continued to go to the gym, although not as frequently as before. Grace, her son Stan, and I discussed what Grace’s next milestone should be—perhaps turn 105—but she was content enjoying life day-to-day.

I was sharing with her my major life updates, including finishing my master’s degree at Stanford and beginning my first full-time job. I also started ranting about some negative experiences that happened a couple



*Amazing Grace, you are a legend. You are what I want to be—a Grace to a young child with hearing loss. I am extraordinarily grateful to you for changing my life, for seeing potential in me when I was so young, and for making the earth a better place to live. You served as an inspiration to people across the nation. You helped give me the strength to stop sitting by myself during lunch. I have since gained a phenomenal set of friends, including you, and I am also a member of the beautiful HLAA family. For that, I am forever indebted to you. You are my hero. Thank you for being a Grace to humanity. Your spirit and legacy will carry on forever. You have left an indelible imprint on my life, and I will never forget you.*

### **For links on Amazing Grace, please see these links:**

<https://youtu.be/F0fVbZWDaIE>

<https://youtu.be/phPIXSiInz4>

<http://www.hearinglossca.org/the-amazing-grace-tiessen-a-personal-journey-of-growth-and-courage>

<http://www.hearinglossca.org/grace-tiessen>

<https://hamiltonrelay.com/news/grace-tiessen-selected-for-hamilton-relay-2015-better-hearing-and-speech-month-recognition-award-for-the-state-of-california-477.html>

<http://www.hearinglossca.org/recognizing-grace-tiessen>

of months earlier. All of a sudden Grace started laughing. I asked her, “Grace, why are you laughing?” She replied, “Life is too short to let that frustrate you.” For the first time in months, I started laughing about something that had been bothering me for months. She brought some life perspective I needed. Before heading to my hotel, I gave Grace a huge hug and said goodbye. Each time I saw Grace, I made sure she knew how much I appreciated her.

I was hoping to see Grace in early April this year, but due to the COVID-19 outbreak, my trip to Los Angeles was cancelled. Earlier last month, I contacted Stan to FaceTime with Grace.

Sadly, August 22, 2019, would be the last time I would see Grace in person. In the middle of the afternoon on Monday, March 23, while working on a cold rainy day in northern California, I found out from Stan that Grace had passed away the previous morning. Fortunately, though, Grace died the way she wanted—of natural causes, with her family, and with little pain. In a way, it is beautiful that her destiny was to pass away at 100, the age she had been so determined to reach. Although I miss Grace so much, I am so glad I spent time with her, and that she watched me grow from a high school student to a working woman. I also know that Grace would not want us to be sad. After all, she embodied what it means to have a meaningful, fulfilled life. **HL**



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*2019, both from Stanford University. Zina has been serving on the Hearing Loss Association of America Board of Directors since 2019. Previously, she served as trustee (2013–2019), secretary (2013–2014), vice president (2014–2015), and president (2015–2019) of the Hearing Loss Association of America, California State Association.*

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## Want to know more about hearing assistive technology?

*HLAA is here to help.*

These three short videos provide easy-to-understand information to help you maximize the benefits of hearing assistive technology (HAT):

- *Technology in the Workplace*
- *Technology for Patients*
- *Technology for Leisure Time*

Find these videos, made possible through a grant from the Consumer Technology Association Foundation, at [hearingloss.org/hearing-help/technology](https://hearingloss.org/hearing-help/technology).

### *Have a specific question?*

HLAA also offers HAT HELP. Just email your HAT-related question to [hat\\_help@hearingloss.org](mailto:hat_help@hearingloss.org). Supervised volunteers—doctor of audiology graduate students from the University of Washington and Gallaudet University—will answer your question with an email reply.

*There are many technological solutions to help you live your best life with hearing loss. HLAA encourages you to use these resources to learn more.*

