



Barbara and the 2020 American Girl Doll of the Year—Joss Kendrick—who is a competitive athlete and wears a hearing aid. HLAA and American Girl have partnered to create awareness about hearing loss. Find out more about how Joss is involved in the 2020 Walk4Hearing. See page 12.

In our social distancing, let's find ways to stay connected. It was always in our future but in the last month or two the future came banging at our door. Let's look at all these things as opportunities.

Ready or Not... The Future is Now

BY BARBARA KELLEY

As I write this column, most of the country is under stay-at-home orders due to the Coronavirus. By now, many of us know someone with COVID-19. Hearing loss is isolating enough, now another layer of isolation is added by having to distance ourselves from others due to the pandemic. Hope flourishes in community, not isolation. Turning inward and being caught up in self-pity, anger and, in some cases, despair, can diminish us as human beings.

Bringing people together who share something in common—hearing loss—was why HLAA was founded by Rocky Stone in 1979. People's desire for a community where it's okay not to hear well has not changed. We crave interaction and information and when we learn how to live well with hearing loss, we naturally want to help others do the same.

Because of the pandemic we had to alter how we bring people together. Little did we know that when we set out to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the HLAA Walk4Hearing that our spring walks would prohibit us from gathering on Walk Day in cities across the country. A quick pivot and an outpouring of support has inspired us to hold our Walk Day celebrations online.

The HLAA2020 Convention in New Orleans is cancelled in order to keep people safe. This is very disappointing to many of us. Our conventions are where we come together, almost like a family, to learn, see the latest technology, and to see old friends and meet new ones. This is where we share our hearing journey.

The Exhibit Hall provides hands-on experience with technology all in one big gathering place. We are planning some type of online experience in late June, open to everyone. It will include a broadcast with captions of the HLAA Research Symposium on the "Latest in Tinnitus Research." We don't have all the details now because we have to adjust fire (using an old military term here!) and see what we are capable of and find funding to bring you information online.

HLAA Chapters, who provide peer-to-peer support, advocate at the local level and provide people with information, have canceled meetings. This leaves a big hole in communities across the country for people to feel supported and give support. Some of our chapters have moved to online meetings, something that many were thinking about for sometime in the future, but now they are forced to adapt in a time of crisis. The need is great for people to not be isolated and chapters who are capable of holding online meetings are stepping in.

Telehealth is something being talked about for hearing health care. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is adept at providing telehealth for all medical conditions even hearing health. But, for most of us, it is something for the future. But, the future is now. With many audiology practices closed, people want to know what to do. If their hearing aid breaks, what if they need programming on cochlear implant processors? Some hearing care providers are offering curbside service or telehealth. But, people have concerns about being able to understand on a telehealth call. How will this work? My orthopedic doctor announced that she would be doing her visits by telehealth. Even I'm a little wary of how this would

work. I mean, can she diagnose my sore bicep without touching it, moving it and doing an x-ray? Are we ready for this?

There's already talk about using artificial intelligence and robots to fit hearing aids. I don't have the timeline on this, but this technology would certainly come in handy right now.

How Do We Function in this New World?

The pandemic has caused us to take a huge leap into the future. What we planned for to happen down the road—telecommuting, online classes, online meetings, telehealth, bringing people together virtually is happening now, ready or not. This will become the new normal. There are so many unanswered questions as we take this giant leap into the future. How can we keep relationships that are so important; how do hearing health professionals keep patient-centered care at the fore when they are physically distant from their patients via telehealth, and, even more extreme, how can patient-centered care be delivered to you by a robot?

Please stay connected with HLAA. There's a section

on hearingloss.org for resources during the COVID crisis; for example, what to do if you are hospitalized, a guide for medical professionals, access for telework and online courses, and more.

Sign up for the free, online *Hearing Life e-News*; go to: hearingloss.org/news-media/e-news/. This is the way we bring you the latest news on a timely basis. Whether we like it or not, this virus has taught us to be agile as we adapt to a new way of life. In our social distancing, let's find ways to stay connected. It was always in our future but in the last month or two the future came banging at our door. Let's look at all these things as opportunities. We are going as fast as we can, learning along the way, to find ways to keep the HLAA community connected.

I hope to see you all soon, it will most likely be online. Until we can meet in person, stay well. **HL**

Barbara Kelley is executive director of HLAA. Reach her at bkelly@hearingloss.org. Follow her on Twitter @ Bkelley_HLAA.

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