

Why It Is Important to Have Leaders for Our HLAA Chapters

BY CARLA BEYER-SMOLIN
AND DEBBIE MOHNEY

I am constantly inspired and amazed by the enthusiastic and determined endeavors of our HLAA State and Chapter leaders. They have made a real difference in the lives of people with hearing loss, no matter how small or how big the contribution is. There are so many examples of your work which span from reaching out and greeting a local newcomer to HLAA at a local chapter meeting to taking on a major advocacy activity in your community or state, and many leaders are now expanding outreach through online meetings during this pandemic to help stay connected.

Our HLAA State Organizations and Chapters are the true homegrown champions for change for people with hearing loss. There is tremendous growth for leadership in HLAA and sometimes the leaders eventually end up serving on the HLAA Board of Directors.

The legacy of our state organizations and chapters depends on the cultivation of leadership and it's quite a challenge to continue the legacy. It takes courage and patience in fostering leadership.

Debbie Mohnney, HLAA Colorado State Chapter Coordinator, knows the importance of developing leadership and decided to share her personal experience in her leadership journey and wrote some encouraging words to hopefully inspire potential future leaders of HLAA.
—*Carla Beyer-Smolín, national chapter and membership coordinator at HLAA*

Debbie Mohnney's Experience

Before I became a leader of the Hearing Loss Association of America Boulder (CO) Chapter, I was a person with a hearing loss who found a group that I could relate to, and people who could relate to me. We all have something in common. We need connection, and because of hearing loss, that connection sometimes becomes broken.

We can't hear (understand) what people are saying. It doesn't matter if it's something important, or just something that someone says in passing. And especially the punchline of a joke. Who wants to go through life never getting the punchline (until a few minutes or hours later, or never, because no one wants to repeat it)?

I've had hearing loss my whole life. I'm used to it, and I just deal with it. Right? Well, mostly, that's true. But, did I have good hearing aids? No. Did I know that

assistive listening devices existed? No. Did I practice good communication skills? Sometimes.

When I first went, I walked into the room. I was scared someone was going to call on me to answer a question that I couldn't hear. Or they were going to make fun of me when I didn't hear what they said. Really.

What I found was people just like me who couldn't hear well, and each of them had their own reasons for being at the meeting. The chapter hosted speakers who came in and talked about hearing aids, telecoils, cochlear implants, coping skills, emergency services, amplified telephones, and the list goes on.

My first meeting was back before we had digital hearing aids and before we had more than just a few amplified systems to use. The same problems plagued us back then as they do now. We couldn't hear. We needed something to use to help us hear better in restaurants, or family gatherings and parties. We needed better hearing aids. We needed access to information.

When I first started attending the meetings, the Boulder Chapter didn't have a vice president. I decided one day that I could help out and be vice president as long as I didn't have to run a meeting. Meaning I was not confident enough to be the leader. My hearing loss kept me from being confident. I jumped in and started doing member profiles for the newsletter. I thought that it would be good for people to get to know one another. It may have been a good thing for other people, but it was especially good for me.

I stepped out of my comfort zone, and started talking to people. Actually, I loved to talk, but I was always shy about approaching people I didn't know. But, I did it. And I did it again! No one made fun of me!

One day the president of the chapter approached me and said "I think that you would make a good president for the chapter. I've served my time, and it's time for me to step down." Oh boy. That was a tall order. I decided to give it a try. I had met the people in the chapter, and they were fun to be around, and with all of the speakers coming to our meetings, I was learning a lot about my hearing loss. And, I had a lot to share with other people, because I now had more experience, and confidence!

It's exciting when someone new comes to a chapter meeting and experiences the hearing loop and realtime

HAAA Chapter Development Workshops are now being offered online and past recordings are available on the HAAA website under Chapter Leader Resources, under the Chapter and State Orgs tab on the home page.

captioning for the first time, because I know that person now has a new tool to use. It's not an instant transformation for someone with hearing loss; we do have to work at it every day. The rewards from leading my chapter meetings continue to grow, and I enjoy helping others discover new things to help them with their hearing loss.

Why is all of this important? It's important because each one of us came to the chapter meeting expecting to have some need met. We want information, and someone to talk to. Someone to talk to... let that sink in.

We have information at our fingertips that didn't exist 30 years ago when the ADA was passed. In addition, the internet has changed things tremendously for people with hearing loss. It doesn't change the need for human interaction, and someone to talk to. Someone else who has walked in similar shoes and has experience with learning about the technology that is out there, and what is the best way to cope with noisy environments like restaurants and parties? This is where *you* come in.

Our Hearing Loss Association of America Chapters are important. They need leaders like you to ensure that people with hearing loss have somewhere to turn to when they need information or need someone to talk to.

You don't have to be a "lone" leader. You have support from people (yes, you do have to ask), and HAAA has support available to leaders, as well as having me as the Colorado State Chapter Coordinator. There are leadership workshops at the national convention, which you can attend at a discounted leader rate. And even though it's work, it's personal development, and it's fun. Please, consider stepping up and taking on a larger role in your chapter. We need you, and we need our chapters. **HL**

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