

CATCHING UP WITH...

# Carol Halla

BY CAROL HALLA

# Advocacy and Adventure

Carol Halla, a veteran of the United States Air Force, was featured in a "Seen & Heard" profile in our November/December 2013 issue of *Hearing Loss Magazine*.



My parents, Warren and Dorothy Weimer, were thrilled to be a part of my retirement ceremony in Charleston, SC. I was so happy they could make it. Bruce, my husband of 36 years, is also a veteran. As an Army draftee (1971-1973), he served in Vietnam.

**W**hat have I been up to since that fun "Seen & Heard" profile? I've been pretty busy, and time has flown by at warp speed. My life as a retiree has been very fulfilling, and I've found ways to stay active and engaged.

My retirement from the Air Force and, later, my retirement from the civilian workforce, were big steps into the unknown. I've always had hobbies and interests, but my full-time job was primary, so retirement was a big adjustment. The years leading up to my cochlear implant (CI) procedure were also a struggle. My hearing had gotten so much worse, and it was so frustrating. I think

there was a grieving process as I struggled to accept the fact that it was gone forever. There are so many sounds that are just taken for granted by people with normal hearing. I missed all of those high-pitched signals that announce things. The sounds from the turn signal in my car, the microwave, the washer and dryer and the dishwasher were all unheard and unnoticed.

## Why Have the Birds Stopped Singing?

Along with that, the sounds that make our lives richer with their presence also faded away. I just realized one day that it was pretty quiet on a walk through a park where I saw lots of birds. As I watched a few birds nearby, I could see their beaks opening, but they were silent. That was one point where I just truly grieved for all that I had lost and was still losing. Leaves rustling, water running and even my cat's meowing were becoming muted. Most of the time I buried this grief for my own hearing loss. But there were other times when I couldn't seem to avoid the pity party. Every one of us with hearing loss completely gets the quality-of-life issues. No one besides another person with hearing challenges fully understands the feelings of being cut off, depressed and frustrated. That awful sense of isolation was so sad. I relied more on my lipreading skills for communication, especially when other noise was present, and that was exhausting.



I became quite good at faking it; at that point my faking skills had reached the professional level. So, the endless feeling of being left out is what drove me on this journey. We can explain that awful feeling to our hearing friends and family. They may be sympathetic to a point, but they can't truly understand life with 24/7 limitations. I slipped further away, even though my husband always did his best to make sure I was included.

As a candidate for—and later a recipient of—cochlear implants (CIs), I learned a lot from mentors and other CI recipients. I joined an online forum and found so much support! My own questions were multiplying; the more I learned, the more questions I raised: “What? They drill a hole in your head? Eww!” and “You’ll have a magnet in your head to connect a round thing on the outside of your scalp? Wow, you can also attach paper clips, just for your own amusement!” My online support group is a fun and caring bunch of people. The more I learned, the more I warmed to the idea of my own CIs. It was a slow process; I took the time to arrive at my own conclusion. It’s a life-changing decision and not one to be taken lightly. Thank goodness I followed that path of research, questioning and decision. It just felt right.

I thought one CI and one hearing aid would be a pretty good action plan. I got my second CI in 2015, and now with two, my hearing perception is much better. Of course, my hearing is far from perfect, as other implant recipients understand, but having two implants has made a world of difference for me.

### From “Radio Silence” to Moderating Live Chats

As I participated more in the CI support groups, meeting friends and enjoying the camaraderie, I was also able to help others who were facing the same struggles that all of us with hearing loss have faced. I was asked to be a moderator on Advanced Bionics’ weekly live chat, “The Hearing Journey,” which I’ve been doing since 2013.

HLAA has always been a valuable source of information. The advocacy and supportive platforms are amazing, as are the annual HLAA Conventions! It’s been so much fun for me to be able to attend a few of these and meet so many of my online friends. Those connections we share are strong and so very special. Additionally, the workshops schedule at the conventions is packed full of great information. The Exhibit Hall has vendors with everything and anything hearing-related. Free pens, too!

### Hearing Loss Knows No Borders

Since about 2014, my husband and I have enjoyed traveling far and wide. We have been so fortunate, and we take nothing for granted. It seems as though every challenge



The 1990–1991 Gulf War—I was in the United Arab Emirates for seven long and uncertain months. I returned home with huge appreciation for my own bathroom and unlimited air conditioning! Here I am wearing a gas mask—way before masks were as fashionable as they are today.

Below: 2015—Machu Picchu Incan ruins, high up in the Andes Mountains in Peru.



Above: 2017 Alaskan Un-Cruise wilderness expedition—we stopped on a glorious day for a glacier hike.

and setback has a silver lining: seemingly random conversations or introductions lead to serendipitous outcomes. In just a few years we added so much to our lifelong list of countries visited. My list totals about 37, and we’ve visited five of the seven continents.

As wonderful as our travels were, 2020 has been the Year of the Great Pause. The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying economic and political situation continue to have rippling repercussions. While I am hopeful about the future, we remain very cautious.

In that profile of me in 2013, I offered what I felt was sage advice; that is, “educate and advocate for yourself! If you need a hearing aid, wear it and take pride in refusing to be too stubborn, shy or self-conscious. Be upfront with your friends and family. They should offer the most support—but only if they are fully informed! Don’t give up easily—most hearing aids are programmable or adjustable to fit your needs.” True then, true now. Advocating is so important, and it’s the gift that keeps on giving.

After missing out on the sounds of life being lived, I became an active participant with a ringside table—life is now filled with all of those sounds that I had missed. One of my favorite things is watching the birds at our backyard feeders. Today, with the sounds of nature to accompany the view, it continues to be endlessly entertaining and never gets old. My life has been enriched in so many ways, but those simple sounds of nature soothe my very soul. **HL**