

Advocates Create Change in More Ways Than One

BY ABRAHAM J. BONOWITZ
WITH CELESTE FITZGERALD

“Our advocacy paid off. By the time New Jersey became the first state since 1964 to legislatively repeal its death penalty, at least one hearing room had been outfitted with a completely new audio system.”

I’ve always been drawn to advocacy, and I wholeheartedly embrace the principle that an open exchange of opinions and ideas is a core goal of a healthy democracy. As someone with a hearing loss since birth, I have had many opportunities to hone my advocacy skills. One of those opportunities stands out from the rest.

Our Hearing Loss Is Invisible But We Are Not

When the Americans with Disabilities Act became law in 1990, it was a hopeful moment for those of us with hearing loss, but we soon learned that accommodations were not going to magically follow to make our lives better. Because our disability is unseen, we must advocate for ourselves and demand appropriate remedies when warranted and possible. This is the story of self-advocacy that became a successful effort to benefit the hearing loss community—advocacy that appropriately played out alongside a historic victory for human rights.

I have worn hearing aids since I was 13 years old to compensate for bilateral hearing loss associated with a birth defect. My friend and colleague, Celeste Fitzgerald, survived a brain tumor that left her with profound hearing loss in her right ear. I favor my left ear, so as you can imagine, we are funny to watch as we twist around to hear each other when facing the same direction.

Celeste and I Work to End Capital Punishment

In January 2006, Celeste and I were both working with New Jerseyans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty; Celeste was executive director and I was field manager. Joining with us was an extraordinary team of volunteers and, together, we led the advocacy effort that resulted in a bipartisan bill that would create a study commission to examine the practical realities and failures of New Jersey’s capital punishment system.

Throughout the year, Celeste and I led our organization through a series of five public hearings of the New Jersey Death Penalty Study Commission. It was historic and exciting, as well as extremely hard work. We organized press conferences, prepared witnesses and mobilized thousands of people who wrote letters and packed hearing rooms. When the Commission recommended ending the death penalty in New Jersey, we spent another year organizing more hearings, public meetings and ultimately, legislative floor debates.

Bottom Line: We Couldn’t Hear Our Own Bill

All of this activity took place in the New Jersey State House, the second oldest operating state capitol building in the country. Celeste and I, along with other individuals with hearing loss who supported ending the death penalty, learned early on that the acoustics in the beautiful old building were terrible, especially in the judiciary committee room, where the death penalty abolition bill was being heard. The problem was serious, as we could not understand what was being said.

Finally, I requested—and was given—assistive listening devices, which enabled Celeste and me to do our jobs. Because we had headsets in the cavernous, centuries-old halls, there were times when we understood what was being said better than many of our friends with normal hearing! Unfortunately, there were not enough devices for everyone who needed them. Clearly, something had to change.

We Began to Advocate for the Hearing Loss Community

For us, that experience began a period of diligent advocacy not only for ourselves but also for our fellow New Jerseyans with hearing loss.

Throughout the course of the legislative process, we reminded legislators and witnesses to speak clearly into their microphones. And as we interacted with staff for the state legislature, we highlighted the problem.

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

—Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt (1858–1919), 26th United States President (1901–1909)

We were consistent and clear, especially about the actual impact of the poor acoustics. We caught the attention of the committee staff, which began to reserve audio equipment for each hearing on the death penalty.

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Celeste and I both continued as leaders in our national movement to end capital punishment, and we’ve helped end it in 10 more states so far. It is no longer surprising to us how many people in our own circles grapple with hearing loss. I often introduce myself at meetings with an admonition for people to speak up, saying, “I know I’m not the only person here who needs or uses hearing aids.” There’s always at least one person who finds me later to express appreciation. Celeste and I both make sure that the meetings and events we help organize have amplification, and we don’t hesitate to (lovingly) admonish people to please use the microphone!

We must all raise our voices to stand up for our right to hear what is going on around us because only then can we fully engage as citizens in our communities. **HL**

Abraham J. Bonowitz is executive director of Death Penalty Action. He serves on the Advisory Board of Journey of Hope... From Violence to Healing, an organization led



Gathering at the New Jersey statehouse, just outside the House Chamber, immediately following the final vote to pass the bill to abolish New Jersey’s death penalty: leaders, board members, and supporters of New Jerseyans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty and some national allies as well. Authors Celeste Fitzgerald is sixth from left in the front, and Abraham Bonowitz is third from the right.

by murder victim family members opposed to the Death Penalty. Learn more and take action at DeathPenaltyAction.org

Celeste Fitzgerald, who recently retired from Equal Justice USA, now serves on the board of directors of Ohioans to Stop Executions. She also works on the issue in her new home state of Florida as a volunteer strategist with Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty.



**GET IN THE
HEARING
LOOP**

**It’s Time to
Get in the
Hearing Loop**

Many people aren’t yet aware of hearing loops or other technologies that can improve communication access and public engagement, or how they can enrich the lives of people with hearing loss, their families, friends, colleagues and even communities. The Get in the Hearing Loop Program is changing that—one loop, one advocate, one ADA request at a time.

Get in the Hearing Loop, a communication access program of HLAA, is dedicated to providing and promoting community education, advocacy on behalf of people with hearing loss, and consultation services to help venues of all kinds successfully implement hearing loop technology.

We dream of a world where people with hearing loss can thrive each day with communication access, full inclusion and equal participation in all aspects of life, everywhere they go.

For more information about hearing loops and the Get in the Hearing Loop Program, visit hearingloss.org/GITHL or email GITHLinfo@hearingloss.org.