

“I always wondered why somebody doesn’t do something about that. Then I realized I was somebody.”

—Lily Tomlin (1939–), American actress, comedian, writer, singer and producer

# Going Forward... and Giving Back

BY DUSTIN FELDMAN

## I Never Felt Disabled

It wasn’t until I was about five years old that my parents, brother and I realized I was having difficulty hearing. Do you remember those in-school hearing tests when you had to line up, sit across from the school nurse, repeat a handful of words like “baseball,” “ice cream” and “hot dog,” and press a button when you heard the beeps? One year, I passed, no problem. The next year, I completely failed, but that was because they put up a divider in the middle of the table that blocked my ability to naturally lipread! This completely caught us by surprise, so my mother drove us to Children’s Hospital for further exams. Sure enough, I was diagnosed with a profound, bilateral, high frequency hearing loss.

No one else in my family had a hearing disability; therefore, this was new to all of us. However, fortunately for me, I grew up with a grandfather who was a double amputee. He lost his right hand and left foot at the age of 26, so for the majority of his life, he lived with a hook and artificial leg. Now *that*, to me, was a disability. My hearing aids were just technology that helped me hear—just like glasses help you see—and because I became so comfortable with my new devices, my classmates and teammates easily made the adjustment as well.

## I Was Strongly Supported by Friends and Family

Throughout my childhood, there were certain accommodations I needed in various settings. Examples were in classroom situations, in athletic environments such as on the basketball court, and social settings such as movie theaters and the beach or pool. I am thankful for my parents and my older brother for setting the tone for me. My parents went to each of my Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) meetings to meet my new teachers, which helped introduce my needs ahead of time. This, and the fact that my brother and I both played basketball competitively, helped me achieve success both on and off the basketball court.

My college career at the University of New Hampshire was the first time I really had to self-accommodate, both academically and socially. As difficult as it was to make that transition, I figured out what I needed in order to succeed. I collaborated with the university’s Disability Services for Students and soon took advantage of new accommodations, such as an assigned note taker. I’ll never forget asking one of my best friends, Dan Gejay, if he would be willing to help me. His response was, “Dustin, of course. You’re my best friend.”

## I Kicked My Advocacy Efforts Up a Notch

Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had the opportunity to testify and advocate during an important testimony at the Massachusetts State House in support of Bill S.597, an act that would provide insurance coverage for hearing aids. At the moment, insurance does not cover the cost of hearing aids for folks older than 21. Unfortunately, this bill is on standby while the office is evaluating co-sponsor requests.

One of my favorite advocacy pursuits while I was studying, as well as after graduation, was being invited to speak to students who majored in Communications Sciences and Disorders. I am grateful for opportunities to inspire soon-to-be audiologists, speech-language pathologists and speech, language and hearing scientists by sharing my story and hearing-related experiences. I enjoy public speaking, and these motivational moments have even served to interest me in the acting profession.

Coincidentally, Marlee Matlin recently talked about the issue of inclusion of people with hearing loss and called on Hollywood to hire more deaf actors after the eagerly anticipated movie, *CODA*, which stands for Child of Deaf Adults, was produced. (It is scheduled for release in August.)

## I Got New Hearing Aids—and a New Job

It was time to invest in new hearing aids, and I knew that wasn’t going to be an easy process. The ones I chose were \$6,000, but the sound quality they provide is excellent, and their Bluetooth capabilities have kept me engaged in the video calls I conduct for my job.

My career has included marketing, sales and entrepreneurial roles. I have worked for large brands, smaller regional brands and startups, and with all of my jobs, I have practiced relationship building, spreading positivity and sharing my passions. My next professional chapter will be in the world of video accessibility, at 3Play Media,

“What is the essence of life? To serve others and to do good.”

—Aristotle (384–322 B.C.)—Greek philosopher and polymath during the Classical period in Ancient Greece

a company that provides closed captioning, transcription and audio description services. It will enable me to be even closer to the Deaf and hearing loss community and to have an impact on those who rely on methods of accessibility when watching or listening to videos. I am thankful that I'll be surrounded by incredibly genuine, supportive teammates, and I look forward to advocating for those who rely on our services.

### I'll Keep Walking the Talk

Going forward, I will continue to be involved in the HLAA Walk4Hearing events, as I enjoy helping with fundraising each year. Over the past 10 years, I have been able to help raise more than \$10,000. It was an absolute honor to be introduced as the Master of Ceremonies (MC) for last year's virtual New England Walk4Hearing. As events transition back to in-person this fall, I have been invited to be this year's MC and cannot wait! As part of the Walk4Hearing's sponsorship committee, I've enjoyed getting to know each of our sponsors, including those in medical research. I strive to be a resource to people with all types of hearing loss, including new, young parents with children who have recently been diagnosed.

All of the stories that make up the 31 years of my life have made me a very passionate person, and I love to give back to the community. I give lots of credit to my amazing girlfriend, Brittanie Hendrix. She uses her nursing skills to help take care of me and has never stopped believing in me since the day we met. Love ya, Britt! **HL**



Dustin Feldman with his girlfriend, Brittanie Hendrix

*Dustin Feldman graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 2012. His latest professional role is with 3Play Media, a Boston-based artificial intelligence and software company providing closed captioning services, transcription and audio description services. He enjoys advocating for accessibility and diversity, equity and inclusion for those in the hearing loss community.*



## HLAA Mission Circle

A monthly online giving program offering convenience while supporting work for people with hearing loss.

[hearingloss.org/make-an-impact](https://hearingloss.org/make-an-impact)