

“I learned a long time ago the wisest thing I can do is be on my own side, be an advocate for myself and others like me.”

—*Maya Angelou (1928–2014), African American singer, poet, memoirist and civil rights advocate and activist*

“You’re Going Deaf!”

BY MARY FRANCES GOSNELL

The journey is partly about helping others hear better and partly about making one’s own personal adjustments. Achieving better hearing is what you make of it—nothing will ever replace normal hearing. But I believe sharing our experiences, encouraging others, reassuring others that they are not alone and making the best of wherever we may be advances us on the path of acceptance and shows the world that there is hope!



Mary Gosnell, left, joins her friend Faith Arrington at a Walk4Hearing at the Damascus Regional Park in Maryland in 2007.

Forty-nine years ago, I had an appointment with an ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctor. I cannot remember why I went but after the hearing test, he directed me to his conference room, sat down across from me and said, “Mrs. Gosnell, I don’t know how to tell you this, but you are going deaf!” And my response was, “As long as I have my eyesight, I can handle it!”

Hearing Aids Worked for Awhile

That was in 1972, when I was in the prime of life: moving up the ladder in my career, volunteering in my church and community and raising a family. So I started with one hearing aid but after some years, I moved on to using hearing aids in both ears. Then in 1996, just as I was returning from a weekend getaway in the mountains, I was suddenly deaf in one ear. What a startling realization!

My hearing continued to go downhill from there. I was having issues using the phone at work; I had trouble understanding what people said to me. This happened in meetings, too, although I tried to compensate by finding a seat at the front of the room. After a family discussion, I decided to retire, since if I could not understand what was being said in a meeting, it was very difficult to bring a report back to my staff. That was not my style of leadership or management, and since I had given the company 43 years of my life, I decided to leave, although I was very thankful for the opportunity to mature with the company. After a year, I went back to work part time helping my nephew keep his office in order. But after a few years, I had to tell him that I could not understand people on the phone.

Cochlear Implants Made a World of Difference

My husband passed away in 2006, and six months later my left ear started to fail. My ENT doctor experimented with several ways to bring my hearing back but to no avail. After seeing how upsetting this was to me, he showed me a letter that he and his audiologist had written to Johns Hopkins Hospital recommending me for cochlear implant (CI) surgery. I read it and said, “Dr. Reed, if this is going to allow me to hear, please send it.” I had no idea what a cochlear implant was but trusted in his wisdom.

I began researching CIs as soon as I got home. Johns Hopkins contacted me within two weeks, and I started the approval process. Within four weeks, I met with the surgeon, Dr. John Niparko, and he agreed that

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

—Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), Indian activist and leader of the Indian independence movement

a cochlear implant would be the solution for my hearing loss. Dr. Niparko was booked for the next three months, but he asked my daughter how soon I would like to have this done. She replied, “Yesterday!” He said, “Well, how about tomorrow?” My daughter and I scrambled the rest of the day to get all the pre-op work done, and then we returned to Johns Hopkins at 5 a.m. the next morning.

The surgery was such a success that since then, I have gone bilateral, and for the past 14 years, I have been an enthusiastic advocate for CIs, sharing my experiences with a variety of audiences.

Now I’m Making a Difference, Too

At some point during this time, a mutual friend introduced me to another cochlear implant recipient, who in turn introduced me to HLAA by way of the HLAA Frederick County Chapter in Maryland. I joined that July and learned that the first Walk4Hearing would be held in October, so I formed a family team called 1Way4Gran2Hear! Our team raised more than \$2,000. There were two other teams from our chapter, as well. Not only did I have my family and friends supporting me but I also got involved with the Walk committee, helping with snacks, coffee and set-up. I have been involved with the Walk4Hearing every year since then, most recently with a team for our HLAA Chapter called Frederick Hearing Loss Advocates. Throughout the past 14 years, our teams have brought in more than \$18,000 for the Walk. I have also attended and been involved in HLAA Conventions.

I then became the leader of the Frederick County Chapter in 2010, which is a very active chapter! We have brought many interesting speakers from Johns Hopkins, the University of Maryland Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences, local ENT doctors and audiologists and representatives from Leader Dogs for Sight and Hearing. We have also organized programs about assistive listening devices and loops and made hospital kits that we have distributed throughout our communities. We manage updates for our own trifold brochure to keep it current for distribution, and we often participate in health fairs and community events.

I Love My Work as an Advocate

My advocacy efforts have also expanded beyond my participation in HLAA. I became a Cochlear Americas volunteer to advocate for CIs, mentoring many recipients, helping them work through the process and encouraging them to keep working on their efforts to hear better. It can be a tedious journey, but it is a worthy one! Since 2007, I have worked with the Hearing and Speech Sciences Auditory Perception and Modeling Lab at the University of Maryland and have been an integral part of its research on CIs.

I also work with the Lions Clubs as a community outreach hearing coordinator in Maryland, Delaware and the District of Columbia. Lions Clubs International finds so many ways to help! They have a mobile unit that we take to various community events to test hearing and vision. We recently purchased an ear scan that we use to check preschool children’s hearing, and we also collect used hearing aids and donate them to universities to be used as teaching tools and to health care teams in third world countries for distribution to citizens in need. Another “Lion” and I developed a program at the University of Maryland Hearing and Speech Clinic to test low-income community members and fit them with hearing aids. I find a Lions Club to support the cost, so the applicant can again be more comfortable with everyday living. I have also made presentations at Lions Club meetings on hearing and manned booths at conventions to promote better hearing and Cochlear Americas. It’s been a wonderful journey, and I’m so grateful to be making it. **HL**

Mary Frances Gosnell continues to live on a part of the farm she was born and raised on close to Mount Airy, Maryland. She retired from Farmers and Mechanics National Bank after 43 years of service—traveling the rungs of the banking ladder from a file clerk to vice president, managing an office for 25 years. After retirement, she was the do-it-all gal at Electrical Solutions for 13 years. She enjoys staying in touch with her daughter and husband, her grandchildren and six great grandchildren.

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