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# It Was an Honest Question: "What Does Advocacy Mean?"

BY BARBARA KELLEY

## Blast From the Past

Here is a flashback to 1988 in Rochester, New York. I was attending my first HLAA Convention, which was called SHHH back then. Revisiting the past for a minute will give us clues about where we are now and where we're going.

The Hearing Loss Association of America was founded in 1979 as Self Help for Hard of Hearing People. "Self-help" was a 1970s and 1980s banner that clearly introduced the significance of taking responsibility for oneself and then turning around and helping others. Self-help and mutual help concepts are different from service delivery by professionals, although the two can complement each other. In the last third of the 20th century, the self-improvement culture, along with books, TV shows and websites, displayed tremendous growth.

These two little words, "self-help" are still the philosophy at the heart of HLAA. We especially see the mutual support aspect in our HLAA Chapters, whether we are meeting in person or in virtual meetings. Part of self-help is creating awareness about an issue. We work to create awareness about hearing health through the Walk4Hearing and other outreach efforts. Our name has evolved, but our mission hasn't.

A valuable component offered by self-help groups is social advocacy. Through the group's efforts, members establish an avenue to spread understanding of their specific concern.

## What Advocacy Means to HLAA

Let's return to the SHHH Convention in Rochester in 1988. We had a lineup of chapter development workshops that year, one of which was called "Advocacy." Being new to the organization and curious about the topic, I attended. One of our members from Texas, an educated, successful businessman, came up to me and asked, "What does advocacy mean?"

I was glad to know I wasn't the only one in the room who didn't know the meaning of the word and how it applied to people with hearing loss. I couldn't answer his question but suggested that with any luck we would be able to figure it out by the end of the workshop.

We hear a lot about advocacy these days and we understand it better in many aspects of life. We are patient, parent, community and equal rights advocates, as well as advocates for other causes. According to a membership survey, our advocacy work is the number one reason people are associated with HLAA. While HLAA works at the national level on behalf of 48 million Americans with hearing loss, there are also efforts made by individuals, HLAA Chapters and State Organizations across the country.

Some words come to mind when I think of people who advocate for better communication access, whether it's in a restaurant, where they want to hear the menu items, or in the workplace where they need an accommodation or for a hearing loop that would be helpful in a place of worship or theater.



Here are those words that describe an advocate:

- Independence
- Confidence
- Person-centered approach
- Empowerment
- Equal opportunity
- Accountability
- Accessibility

### HLAA Advocates Walk the Talk

Not everyone is a force for change every day or at every opportunity. We're not always on our game to ask or push for what we need. We get tired, and we have our days when neither self-confidence nor fire-in-the-belly feeling is there. And we need to accept that; it's called being human. Then there are the other times when we're emboldened to speak out and educate people about what

we need, and we won't rest until we convince them that being unable to hear or comprehend is simply unacceptable when something can be done.

It's not critical to know the exact definition of the word advocacy; what matters is that we know about the spirit of the word and what it achieves. All you have to do is read the stories in this issue of *Hearing Life* to see the passion and commitment behind the word.

Advocates have hope for the future. The person who is hopeful looks at a situation and says, "It will be OK. There's something that can be done about it. It's really in our hands." **HL**

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## In Memoriam: Mark Ross

July 29, 1926 - April 21, 2021

Mark Ross, 94, died peacefully at home in Santa Barbara, California, on April 21, 2021. He proudly served the country in WWII with all five of his brothers, and despite sustaining substantial damage to his hearing, eagerly enlisted to serve in Korea. As his hearing deteriorated due to a combination of war injuries and an inherited condition, he pursued a career in audiology, receiving his PhD in audiology in 1962. Known as the "father of aural rehabilitation," he authored countless articles over the years and was active in numerous organizations devoted to advocating for people with hearing loss. Ross received the Hearing Loss Association of America's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008. Upon accepting the award, he said that the most gratifying time of his life had been since retirement and all the work he had been able to do in the field, including writing for *Hearing Loss Magazine*.

