

“If you want to go quickly, go alone.  
If you want to go far, go together.”

—African proverb

# You Belong Here

BY SENTHIL SRINIVASAN

Growing up with moderate hearing loss, I struggled for years with feelings of isolation. I always felt like an outsider and didn't have many friends. All of my life, I have worn hearing aids, and I felt separated from mainstream society. In the early years of my adulthood, I experienced social anxiety, particularly in the workplace, where most of my social interaction took place and where I was surrounded by hearing people.

In 2008, I reached a turning point when I discovered my destiny. I decided to take action to overcome my social challenges: I launched a new website, DeafandHoH.com, which would enable me to reach out to people who were having similar experiences and also help me come out of my shell. It helped me realize I am not alone.

## From Alone In This World to Making a World of Difference

I was honored to share my personal story in the November/December 2011 issue of *Hearing Loss Magazine*. Since then, I have continued to expand DeafandHoH.com and add more features to help people who are deaf or have hearing loss. Ten years later, DeafandHoH.com has grown to encompass not only the website and a chat room but also a blog, online forum and growing social media presence. Our mission is to empower the hearing loss community by promoting confident social interaction and open communication.

I have connected with so many members who have made a positive contribution to our hearing loss community. A student intern attending the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee offered to help write website content and feature members' stories to strengthen the sense of connection within our community. Her contribution brought us more students who are very passionate about connecting with people in our community because they have friends, relatives or family members who are deaf or have hearing loss. Others are simply actively involved with us because they are studying American Sign Language. One of our community members, a former student intern named Hannah, who has a cochlear implant to help her hear, writes:

*In my junior year, I was matched with DeafandHoH.com for an internship through the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. In that time, I drew heavily on my background as a deaf person who used a cochlear implant and was fluent in both American Sign Language and Cued American English. I've always seen writing as a way to build visual bridges, and deafandhoh.com allowed me to exercise that skill set. After my internship formally ended, I stayed on in a different role mainly, guiding future interns, most of whom were hearing people who did not have much experience with the deaf/hard of hearing community, if any at all. In turn, it taught me quite a bit about management and successfully working with different personalities!*

## We Want to Hear Your Story

Featuring members has been my greatest passion because I know everyone in our community has a unique story to share that might inspire others—just like me. We have profiled many members during the past decade. In addition, we are now doing a #MemberMonday spotlight on our Facebook group page to give our Facebook friends an opportunity to introduce themselves, share their reasons for joining our group and describe the benefits they hope to receive from their membership. It's our way of helping to make them feel welcome.

I attended the 2013 HCAA Convention in Portland, Oregon, and connected with the Young Adults Group. It was a great experience, and I made a lot of friends. A few of the people I met at the convention were so inspired by what I am doing with the website and expanding our community, they wanted to make a contribution by being featured and sharing their stories. One of them, Zina Jawadi, offers her thoughts:

*I first met Senthil at the HCAA Convention in Portland and was impressed by his dedication to and impact on the hearing loss community. I benefit tremendously from the conversations in the Facebook group and from the articles on the website. Writing a letter to my younger self for deafandhoh.com was memorable, and I thoroughly enjoyed rereading that letter years later. It has been an absolute pleasure being a part of the deafandhoh.com community and being friends with Senthil.*

## We Love Chatting With Our Friends

I continue to host Open Chat Night on the first and third Wednesdays of each month. This enables members in our hearing loss community to join us in a live,

“I am only one, but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do.”

—Edward Everett Hale (1822–1909), American author, historian and Unitarian minister



Senthil Srinivasan with Zina Jawadi at HCAA Convention 2013 in Portland, Oregon

text-based chat room to share personal experiences, discuss various topics and simply engage in conversation. This is usually a smaller group, but enough regulars attend that I am able to keep our chat going strong. It feels worthwhile to make a difference in people's lives. A retired police officer named Bill who wears hearing aids never misses our chats; he is a person everybody in our chat community has known for more than a decade. We also have another regular chat member named Kirsten who I met at an HCAA Convention. She wears CIs, and she has shared a number of her experiences with our members.

Here's what Kirsten has to say:

*This was a broad group, including people who identified as Deaf, deaf or hard of hearing. Some had a hearing aid, some did not have hearing aids; some knew signing, some knew no signing. Some were fully hearing, working as an audiologist or interpreter, and some were students studying various hearing-related fields. It was kind of a revolving door with different people in and out each week, along with a core group of regulars. We shared tips relating to all things hearing—or rather I should say lack of hearing—such as hearing aids, CIs and signing. I was able to share my CI experience with others interested. I learned the difference between Deaf and deaf\* and it was here where I was gifted with my sign name.*

## When In Doubt, Reach Out

My involvement with the hearing loss community has always been a rewarding experience. My goal is to continue reaching out to our members so they can share their personal stories and journeys. I want to help our members remember: You are not alone in this world, and our community at deafandhoh.com will always make you feel that you belong here.

You can visit the online community Senthil created at deafandhoh.com. **HL**

\*The National Association of the Deaf uses the lower-case deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language, American Sign Language, and a culture.

*Senthil Srinivasan lives in Waukesha, Wisconsin, and for the past 20 years has worked in the web/graphic design field. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with a bachelor's degree in graphic design. During his free time, he enjoys watching movies, listening to music, writing and spending time with family.*



Senthil launched DeafandHoh.com in 2008 and deafandhohkids.com in 2014.