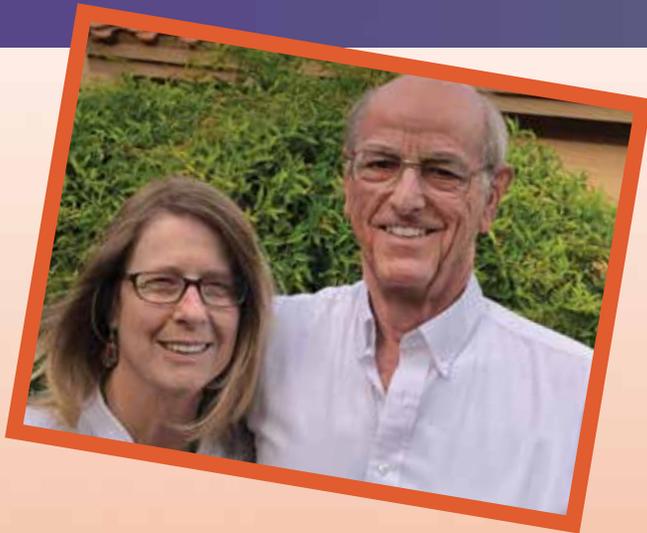


“All advocacy is, at its core, an exercise in empathy.”

—Samantha Power (1970–), Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development



Pat and Fred Williams

Advocates Who Make a Profound Impact

BY SHANNON TYREE

Many of us use the word “profound” to describe our hearing loss. I use it to describe the impact Pat and Fred Williams have had on my life and on the lives of many others with hearing loss. They are members of the HLAA West Valley Chapter, Arizona, and they are two of the finest examples of advocates for people with hearing loss that I have ever met.

In thinking about the definition of advocacy, many people think of supporting something publicly, and while that is often the case, Pat and Fred’s success with advocacy is based on a simple technique—one we can all learn to use to our benefit. They do not shout their message from the rooftops; rather, they communicate it in a personal and inviting way. They successfully help everyone they meet who has hearing loss by solving problems and creating solutions—one person at a time.

Fred Makes a Caring Connection

Fred, a retired Air Force veteran who stands 6 feet, 4 inches tall and could seem imposing, has an easy smile and gentle disposition that immediately put you at ease. When talking with Fred, who is also a cochlear implant recipient, you’re struck by the way he makes you feel as if you are the only person in the room and the only person that matters. While normally two people with severe hearing loss who are trying to have a conversation might encounter obstacles, communication is easy with Fred—especially if you’re talking about baseball!

Top, left: Pat and Fred Williams. Middle: Melanie O'Rourke and her service dog Paddington, Fred and Pat, and author Shannon Tyree at HLAA2019 Convention in Rochester, New York. Bottom: Pat and Fred attend a Walk4hearing event.



“When the world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.”

—*Malala Yousafzai (1997–), Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest Nobel Laureate*

Fred has also been an active member of the Hard of Hearing Task Force at the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ACDHH) and was appointed by the governor to serve as a commissioner on the board for several years.

Pat Reaches Out and Finds a Way

Pat is retired from years in the education field, where she first served as a teacher of kindergarten through eighth grade children with learning disabilities and later transitioned to training staff and students with educational technology. Pat is a hearing person who combines her warm, caring energy with a can-do attitude that makes her the ideal solution-finding advocate, not only for Fred but also for the rest of us within our chapter.

I met Pat and Fred through our 55+ community’s Lifelong Learning Program, where I led monthly discussions about TED Talks. I had never heard of HLAA before, but when Pat learned I have hearing loss, she asked if I would make a presentation at the West Valley Chapter meeting, since the speaker had canceled at the last minute. She said, “Just share your hearing loss journey and any helpful tips that would benefit our members.” Her invitation was a wonderful gift: I enjoyed explaining what works for me and encouraging others to give it a try. Again, it’s not done by shouting from the rooftops; it’s done through a personal invitation and an equally personal connection, or as I call it, the Williams Method of Advocacy.

Melanie O’Rourke, West Valley Chapter president, and amazing hearing loss advocate herself, says of Pat and Fred, “As president of a local HLAA Chapter, I could not

“We at the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and of Hearing are very fortunate to have Fred as a commissioner. He is committed, very involved and a strong advocate for the hard of hearing community in Arizona.”

—*Sherri Collins, Executive Director, Arizona Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing*

have more dedicated members as a part of our chapter to advocate for individuals with hearing loss.”

Advocacy Means Taking Action

At the chapter meetings, Fred, in his usual caring way—and maybe after a joke or two—always tells our assembled group, “You are not alone.” I believe the success of our growing chapter is due in part to our members knowing and believing Fred means it. How? He takes action. When COVID-19 stopped in-person meetings, Fred suggested that those of us on the board should call all of our members and check in, find out if they were OK and tell them we are here for them. I can vividly recall him saying, “Tell them they are not alone, and we are here for them.”

Of course, this last year meant our meetings were entirely remote in nature. Pat immediately leaned in to become our Zoom expert, making sure members had what they needed and if not, called them individually and walked them through the new process of virtual meetings. Pat and Fred were like shepherds tending their flock: they would not let anyone be forgotten on their watch.

Coping Creatively With COVID-19

Fred started a weekly, virtual book group to help keep our members connected to each other. We’re now reading our third book, and if anyone has difficulty getting the book, one magically shows up on your doorstep. Pat is in the early stages of developing and organizing a writers’ group after hearing the many stories members share with one another; it is her way of providing members with a creative outlet. When Pat and Fred see a need, they meet it, finding ways to connect people and reaching out, especially when the problem is difficult or challenging.

One example of the Williams’ genuine public advocacy can be found right here in our own backyard. Our performing arts center was considering a complete reconstruction of the 300-seat theater. Without hesitation, Pat and Fred stepped in to ensure that it would be looped.

“Fred frequently reaches out to me with ideas on how to enhance services for the hard of hearing community here in Arizona. He is always thoughtful in his approach and brings a wealth of experience to the task force. Without leaders like Fred, the hard of hearing community would be more isolated. His efforts in organizing the community and providing educational resources through the West Valley Chapter are greatly appreciated!”

—*Michele Michaels, Hearing Healthcare Program Manager, Arizona Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing*

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead (1901–1978), American cultural anthropologist

They took time to educate people who had no idea what a hearing induction loop is or why it is important. They provided all the information needed, collaborating with the audio engineers and even developing procedures for hearing loop use and maintenance. Many people in our community wear hearing aids and even they were completely unaware of hearing loop technology until Pat and Fred made sure it was available.

Before COVID-19 put a stop to in-person gatherings, the Williams advocated for captioning for our Monday lecture series, as well, and they met with some resistance because people don’t like change or rising costs. However, it wasn’t long before they heard positive comments: people realized they could understand everything the presenters said. In addition to looping the theater, Pat and Fred were successful in having the main classroom used for Lifelong Learning looped, as well as several rooms at their church. Their community outreach is making a difference! The Williams belong to a veteran’s group known as the Military Officers Association of America, where meetings are now captioned, thanks to Pat and Fred. The list of their contributions goes on and on.

I will say it for everyone who has received a helping hand from Pat or Fred, whether at our chapter meetings or from neighbors who can now hear programs without effort and enjoy captions that help fill gaps, “Thank you, Pat and Fred.”

Would you like to advocate more? If you don’t know where to start, I recommend the Williams Method of Advocacy: get personal, get involved and get it done! **HL**

“The West Valley Chapter was beginning its revitalization when I asked Fred if he would like to join our board. He readily agreed and Pat, as the hearing wife, attended meetings with Fred. Soon Pat shared her “techie” knowledge and she has been our “go-to” person for all things Zoom for our chapter. She is also our chapter’s treasurer. Not only have Pat and Fred provided so much knowledge, energy and wit to our chapter and meetings but also to individual members, assisting them with explanations about specifics with their hearing aids and assistive listening devices.”

—Melanie O’Rourke, President, HLAA West Valley Chapter

Shannon Tyree, who has hearing loss, is a member of the HLAA West Valley Chapter. She writes a blog, My Golden Hears, about the experiences and antics of training her golden retriever service dog, Riley. She published a memoir, Love Stories: Inside Stories of an Outdoor Girl in 2019, and she and Riley are currently writing her next book, Severe to Profound. She and her husband Tom, who also has hearing loss, live in Goodyear, Arizona.



Are you a veteran living with hearing loss, tinnitus or other auditory issue?



HLAA stands ready to help our nation’s veterans live successfully with hearing loss and related issues. In addition to a complimentary Online Membership and first-time convention registration, you can participate in the HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter.

The mission of the HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter is to provide education, be an advocate for veterans with hearing loss and to provide a support system to help them return to civilian life.

For more information, go to hearingloss.org/Veterans or email chapters@hearingloss.org.

