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Acceptance, Inclusion and Community

BY MICHAEL MEYER

Recently, I said something that I've never said before—I told someone new at work, “I’m disabled.” Although I have navigated through and around my hearing loss since I was in kindergarten, saying it aloud to someone I’d just met seems like a significant moment. It represents acceptance of a stark truth and perhaps resignation that my hearing loss is following an unfortunate trajectory that I cannot stop. I know what my future looks like. I’ve been chasing my dad’s audiogram all my life and am closing the gap quickly. I saw how he and others have struggled. I’m not without hope, but I am clear-eyed about what’s ahead. Accepting hearing loss doesn’t come easy, especially for a Type A personality like I am.

So, what changed that’s gotten me to this point? As my hearing has worsened, I’ve leaned more into the HLAA community, which has unsurprisingly welcomed me with open arms because inclusion is in our DNA. Our nationwide community of support shares a desire to navigate hearing loss together and to help others avoid the painful social isolation that too often comes with a diagnosis. The entire point of HLAA is inclusion, and that’s why we dedicate this issue of *Hearing Life* to the topic.

Inclusion is on display most vividly at our annual conventions, where I’m surrounded by people who have triumphed against the odds and generously share the ups and downs of their journey so that others might learn. In 2022, I returned from the HLAA Convention in Tampa intent on helping my co-workers with hearing loss. I formed an employee resource group where we could share our knowledge and experiences. I intervened when colleagues struggled to figure out technologies and tactics for hearing well at work. And I talked openly about my disability—that’s a big thing. As I have spoken about my hearing loss, co-workers have become helpful allies for me, making sure that I am able to fully participate in every work setting. As a leader in my company, when I talk openly, I’m also encouraging others to be open about their disabilities. I got comfortable with this after hearing others do it at the HLAA Convention. Talking openly about hearing loss makes it sound normal and that is a great way to make others realize that they are not alone.

So, what about you? There are 48 million Americans with hearing loss. Each of us can play a role in introducing people who have hearing loss to HLAA. It’s not hard. I challenge you to invite one new person to a chapter meeting. Or you can encourage one person to see an audiologist and take control of their hearing health. Or you can captain a Walk4Hearing team. Or you can come to our HLAA 2024 Convention in Phoenix next June to share your story. When you do these things, you are fulfilling the mission of HLAA. Inclusion isn’t a loud political stance or a grand sweeping gesture. Inclusion is what you and I are doing to invite one person at a time into the HLAA community. Inclusion sits at the center of HLAA’s mission. It’s why Rocky Stone started this organization. Now, it’s our job to achieve the mission. **HL**

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