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of the World Hearing
Forum of the WHO.
We like to think we're
part of the collective
players on the world's
stage who make
an impact.**

All the World's a Stage

BY BARBARA KELLEY

A version of this article appeared on our Hear This! Blog in February. Make sure you're signed up for alerts like this at bit.ly/3VPtbpe.

On March 3, World Hearing Day appears on the world's stage. According to the World Health Organization's World Hearing Forum, World Hearing Day started in 2007 known as International Ear Day. In 2016 it was renamed to its current name of World Hearing Day, where people across the globe take note to pay attention to hearing health. Each year, March 3 is set aside to raise awareness on how to prevent hearing loss and promote ear and hearing care across the world.

For some people, every day is a hearing day, or a hearing loss day. If you have a hearing loss, your day might start out by thinking about how you'll negotiate that day. Will you have enough batteries to power your hearing aid or cochlear implant? Will you face a fast-talking colleague who forgets to face you when he or she speaks? Will your friends want to meet in a noisy restaurant where you already know that you'll have to bluff your way through the night? If you haven't taken the step to getting a hearing aid, will you be dreading when you mishear an important detail of something your spouse told you ... and then be accused of not paying attention? (Yikes!)

Finally, the world has caught up to an important health issue—hearing, how to protect it, care for it, and, if possible, treat it. This year's World Hearing Day's theme is "Ear and hearing care for all, let's make it a reality." Considering the number of people in the world with some degree of hearing loss (more than 1.5 billion), not all countries have access to good hearing care, so this is an important global goal. However, here in the U.S., hearing health still is often overlooked in primary care screenings. For those who have regular physicals, practically every part of the body is screened, tested or probed, except for our ears. Up until three years ago, my own physician looked in my ears every year but never screened for hearing loss. Fortunately, he now screens all his patients for hearing loss.

Hearing health is finally on the world stage as a primary health concern that affects our quality of life and overall health. Here in the U.S., the FDA recently cleared over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids to be sold directly to consumers, which has not only opened the market to a new class of products, but it's brought much-needed media and public attention to the issue of hearing loss. At HLAA, our strategic goals are to broaden our message, reach new audiences, and let people of all ages and all levels of hearing loss, know that something can be done about it.

We still have a lot of work to do. Hearing aids and services are often not covered in health insurance plans and certainly not by traditional Medicare. Not all primary care providers ask about hearing on intake forms. And, in medical settings, if you request an accommodation to help you understand the conversation, you're most likely offered a sign language interpreter, which only helps a small percentage of people, leaving out other widely used forms of accessible

communication. We are working daily to change things for the better.

Since 1979, this organization has accomplished a lot. HLAA has been a part of every piece of federal legislation involving communication access, and many involving access to hearing care over the last four decades. In 1979 there was no World Hearing Day. Now, in 2023, HLAA has been in the national media more in one year than in our 44 years of existence. We also work in partnership with hearing health care providers and the hearing industry who all have similar goals—let's bring people along with patient-centered care and technology. We're not in this alone.

And you're not alone either. Being part of this diverse HLAA community can mean many different things. You can be anonymous or as active as you wish. You can spearhead advocacy in your community or you can simply benefit from the vast resources HLAA provides to learn about hearing loss. For us, every day is World Hearing Day, and we're here for everyone at every point in their hearing journey.

We have local HLAA Chapters across the country to meet people in their hometowns. We have free online *Hearing Life* e-News, to help you get critical empowering information and resources. We have free, captioned

webinars on topics such as employment communication and technology. We invite you to dig into HLAA's community of support and empowering resources and to invite others to do the same.

This World Hearing Day, there's one message we want you to take to heart: you're not alone and you can do something about your hearing loss. Help spread the word about hearing health to others. Make World Hearing Day as the day you take some action for yourself, and for the world. **HL**

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