Born prematurely with bilateral severe to profound hearing loss, Sergio Cuevas, Ph.D., was raised near the Mexican border in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Undiagnosed until the second grade, he received his first pair of hearing aids in fifth grade, purchased out-of-pocket with the $2,000 his uninsured parents had diligently saved over three years.

They lasted one year.

The 10-year-old boy was never told how to take care of the delicate electronic instruments or to protect them from heat, humidity, moisture, sports and other activities. Like many residents of the largely Mexican American community, his immigrant parents spoke no English and had only a third-grade education, so they were unable to communicate with health professionals.

After that, he refused to get another pair of hearing aids. His family didn’t want to depend on government assistance, and he didn’t want to cause them more financial difficulties.

Cuevas says, “Growing up, I had no role models with hearing loss and minimal access to hearing care resources. So, I learned on my own without guidance. In our culture and family, invisible disabilities like hearing loss were only an inconvenience, not a health issue. If you can do the job or excel in school, you’re fine and don’t need any support. Just make the effort, don’t complain, be grateful and keep moving forward.”

Even without hearing aids, he remained an excellent student. He paid close attention in class and worked twice as hard as other students to retain his high grades.

Bilingual, Cuevas had instinctively developed lipreading skills in both English and Spanish. Through middle and high school, he took gifted and advanced placement (AP) courses of study, supported with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and 504 Plan.

“Yet, until much later, I wasn’t aware of the long-term social impacts of missing conversations, and how this contributed to my low self-confidence,” he recalls. “Because my culture didn’t take hearing loss seriously, I never sought out resources and was addicted to hiding my invisible disability from classmates and others for a long time.”

Cuevas became a first-generation college student with financial support from Pell Grants. It was only after earning his bachelor’s degree, just before starting his first full-time position as a high school teacher that he finally got his second pair of hearing aids at age 21, through the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program of the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC). This experience impressed him so much that he went on to earn both a master’s degree and Ph.D. in rehabilitation counseling with a tuition waiver through the same program.

He says, “Since being fitted with hearing aids, I’ve become more aware of what I was missing. I’ve grown to become more confident talking to people and now make a point of self-advocating to find the right information. As I’ve told my clients with disabilities, the sooner you advocate for yourself, the sooner you benefit.”

After graduating, Cuevas spent eight years as a VR counselor with TWC. For the past two years, he has served as assistant director of career services at the University of New Orleans, where he discovered the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) was holding its annual convention in June 2023. His employer supported him to register and attend.

“For the first time, I felt like I was home and not alone in this journey of hearing loss.”

Read about the HLAA 2024 Convention in Phoenix on page 21. HL