Personal Reflections on Services for Persons with Hearing Loss

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As a Hard-of-Hearing person my life began with a normal delivery and soon it was discovered during my first year of life that I was not able to hear. I grew up in Ruidoso, New Mexico, with both parents having normal hearing and being very well educated. With my father's background in the medical field and my mother's background in special education, they advocated for my educational success.

I am from a generation that was looked upon as being very limited in terms of careers and services available for a person who was severe-to-profoundly hard of hearing. In order to understand the success as well as the barriers of my educational career, one must understand the educational system has changed dramatically in the last 20 to 30 years. Looking back today remembering the problematic issues in my life, I now understand that the system was limited in those days and we were viewed by society as being different.

With the hearing aid industry changing the features of the behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aid, the ridiculing of my speech and the way I responded to sound by my peers was almost eliminated. Now I am a firm believer in the BTE aids because of the wide range of assistive listening devices that are available. As I traveled the world as an adult, I have had the opportunity to use the BTE "T" switch on the aid in train stations, castles, cathedrals, and museums throughout the United Kingdom. This was a beginning that allowed me to realize that I was self-reliant and could be independent with language and hearing.

Growing up, I, like any other teenagers, had dreams of the future. I had the same dreams as others to become the best that I could be. Vogue and fashion

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were any girl's fame. I was very self-conscious of my hearing aids because they were large and unattractive BTEs. I wore my hair over my ears, because people would associate me with their grandparents and older friend's using hearing aids. I began to feel like I was the only teenager that wore hearing aids. Soon I started to believe that I was an old person in a young person's body. I started to withdraw from my friends and family because I could not identify with anyone. I wanted so badly to meet another hard-of-hearing person my age.

By the time I was nearing the end of high school, I had dreams of going to college with my hearing friends. I never thought of my deafness as a barrier to a college education and a good future. However, I soon found out from the school counselor that I was to look at a trade school or full-time employment. I was told that I would never amount to anything. This convinced me that reality and dreams often do not go together.

Being the only hard-of-hearing student in the high school posed problems for the teachers and the administration. The main reason was they did not know what to do for accommodations in the classroom. Often times, I was sent to Special Education classes for additional help.

Rather than accept this as a setback to my dreams, I decided to obtain a bachelor's degree in Communications Disorders. I felt that with this degree I was sure to obtain a good job and also knock down barriers for students with deafness who were being overlooked in higher education. After several years of working with students with disabilities in higher education, I decided that my bachelor's degree limited me to one area of expertise when working with students who have multiple disabilities. I then returned to school for a Master's degree in Special Education to gain a better insight of new laws and multiple disabilities.

With increasing responsibilities, I reached the point where I wanted to understand and advocate for students with all kinds of disabilities. Since I did not have an advocate or a mentor who guided me to my full potential during my youth, as an adult I had to rely on outside resources and referrals. As I reflect, I think that an Audiologist could have filled this void by giving me a sense of the many options I had, as well as how to pursue them. This would have enabled me to have a better knowledge of dealing with the hearing society and what accommodations could be expected. Stemming from my own experience, my goal now is to be a role-model for persons who do have a disability and to challenge them to do their best and achieve their goals.

In conclusion, I have seen many changes in the educational system that eliminates barriers for people with disabilities. Since the day my parents discovered my deafness, they were afraid that my life would be limited to working in a grocery store or some other kind of very low-level job with no future. Their perseverance toward my education helped in making me become the best that I could be. Outside of Gallaudet University in Washington DC, I knew of no other institutions of higher education for deaf people. Over the years things have changed dramatically. More and more deaf people have begun to break down the medical and educational barriers. Slowly but surely, deaf people have entered fields that have been closed to them and in so doing have opened the doors for others. Many barriers have been removed, yet the job is not finished.

This is where the Audiologist can play a role and remember that what is being offered to the youth today can also be offered to the adults who are seeking hearing aids and ear molds. For example, my dream came true when I was allowed to choose the color of my ear mold. I had never been given the opportunity to stylize my own BTE aids and molds until this year. I decided that I was worthy to have green and blue swirled ear molds, totally out of my character. Audiologists may want to consider when working with adults on hearing aids and ear molds to allow them to have a vital voice in their decision-making process. Because they participate in the decision making, they will be more apt to wear the aids. My own drive and determination and a lot of hard work is what made a normal life possible for me. It should be remembered that I come from a generation that did not have the good fortune of IDEA and ADA in public school and did not have the support services that exist today. Perhaps these reflections will be of help to those serving the hard-of-hearing adults of today, who certainly have different needs than the hard-of-hearing adults will have 10 years from now.