

hearing matters

AUGUST 200

the journal of Self Help for Hard of Hearing people



Mary Salter AM

The Libby Harricks Achievement Award Winner for 2000

Going to the Olympics ? - see page 12

The Libby Harricks Achievement Award for 2000

**Achievement - n - something accomplished by valour, boldness or superior ability
To Achieve - vt - to bring to a successful end by effort**

This annual award was established by SHHH Australia to honour the memory of former SHHH President, Libby Harricks who died in August 1998 from cancer. The award was named the Libby Harricks Achievement Award to recognise both Libby's determination to rise above her profound hearing loss acquired in young adulthood and the enormous self help efforts made by many others to "achieve" success in their own way.

As announced in the May issue, the winner of the Libby Harricks Achievement Award for 2000 is

Mary Salter AM

Mary is the President of the Deafness Association of the Northern Territory.

Mary aged 19 - hearing impaired since 7 years of age and already determined to get on with life.



Mary's story as she tells it herself ...

"I have been asked by SHHH to write my life story, which may be seen as a history of progress in both the assessment and assistance of hearing loss. I certainly have been the recipient of both good luck and bad luck during my long life.

I was orphaned at a very early age, my father having died through WWI wounds when I was three and my mother from cancer when I was seven. I was removed from a very loving noisy family to the care of a childless aunt. At the same time I lost my hearing in one ear through middle ear infection with mastoid complications, very common and dangerous in the days before antibiotics. Of course, there were no hearing aids or hearing assessment programmes in those days.

All this sounds calamitous in early childhood but it had some remarkably productive side effects. Because I was a very lonely child I took refuge in reading and in class became a very good lipreader. My understanding headmistress, who had been a friend of my mother, took great care to see that I sat in the front of the class and kept me well supplied with good literature, mostly Dickens. Consequently I won a scholarship to a prestigious West London girls school which I was allowed to take up on conditions that I sat in front of the class and took weekly "speech training" lessons for my distorted voice. It has left me stuck with an unshakeable English accent despite all my years in Australia.

On leaving school (and not unnaturally in view of my father's death, I was an ardent pacifist) WWII broke out. I met my husband who had attended the boys branch of

*I was near far too many bombs with the consequence that at the war's end,
I lipread the dreaded words spoken by a London Hospital specialist
"You will never hear again."*

my old school. He, intelligent lad, realized we had got into a war we had to win and volunteered as an RAF pilot. As a pilot's average life span was six weeks at the time, we hastily got married on the day the London Blitz started on the 7th September 1940. We spent our honeymoon in an air raid shelter with our landlady (a story worth telling but not here!) He subsequently departed for training to South Africa, leaving me pregnant and a very young stretcher party member. I was near far too many bombs with the consequence that at the war's end, I lipread the dreaded words spoken by a London Hospital specialist "You will never hear again, but never mind, have a hearing aid." This was presented to me in a huge cardboard box and I went home vowing I would never wear such a contraption.

My husband was incredibly supportive, refusing to allow me to feel sorry for myself and designing a most ingenious method of disguise for this ambulatory telephone exchange that passed as a hearing aid in those days. It consisted of a wide black velvet band over the huge earphones, a sling in my bra for the receiver which was attached to elastic around my thigh to the two vast batteries. This enabled me to communicate with my family and friends, but I would never have done the four minute mile wearing it! This went on for about five years when I purchased an aid in a much smaller package.

I had by this time learned to do Pitman's shorthand whilst lipreading and took up part time secretarial work. I must confess I made up most of the letters, but as I was rather more literate than most of my "bosses" this did no harm whatsoever. It was disconcerting when one of the men I worked for, a surgeon, came out of the operating theatre one day still wearing his mask and I had to 'fess up.

It is incomprehensible to me that a hearing loss should be considered by some people to be something to conceal. The first small aids were embedded in the arms of spectacles with clear lenses; apparently it was OK to be shortsighted, but not to be deaf. Why?

Thank goodness such attitudes are slowly changing and I spend my time telling people who cope with a hearing loss that they should be immensely proud of themselves. I know I am.

I got caught up in the deafness merry-go-round when I came to Darwin to be near my daughter and her family. Almost at once I contracted a tropical ear infection which totally robbed me of my small amount of residual hearing. My doctor referred me to the one specialist ENT surgeon then working in Darwin. I was told that he had gone on three months leave, but that there were some excellent "bush doctors" at the hospital. I told them they could continue to doctor their bushes, but they were not touching my ear.

I contacted the Minister of Health who could do nothing in the matter. I contacted the Deafness Association of the Northern Territory, but found them very much a paper tiger. I then attended an advertised meeting on the future of the Deafness Association, only to find that it had been called to close the whole thing down. I thought this was a tragedy as it was the only consumer organization for the deaf in the Territory. The President, Committee and Coordinator were all leaving. My husband, bless him, said "She'll take it on" and pointed to me. I told the meeting that I could hear zilch, but the poor dear then offered to translate for me as I could lipread him well. This was an offer he very often regretted later.

I subsequently had the supreme good fortune to meet Libby Harricks who became my role model. To know her was to love her and every time she came to Darwin we went out to dinner. We were diagnosed with cancer at the same time and in her case, we thought she had it beat. Alas it was not to be. The bad luck/good luck pattern for me continued. I later contracted a very rare form of nerve cancer and have survived six major operations. My husband has advanced emphysema and dementia and is in an excellent nursing home where I visit him every day for a bit of mutual TLC. He fortunately still knows me. Well, I suppose after all those years, I'd be hard to forget.

I am a passionate supporter of communication and consider it cruel and arbitrary that anybody should discourage anything that makes communication easier for those who've lost their hearing. Most of my friends wish I wasn't such an enthusiastic communicator and would belt up occasionally!

Mary's story continues ...

I have large and extended families in both Darwin and Melbourne, none of whom have a hearing loss. I consider myself supremely fortunate in being able to turn them off, as they are all communicators par excellence.

I do not regret for one moment my hearing loss. My family frequently tell me that but for it, I might have become another Maggie Thatcher - thank God for small mercies, one was enough!"

SHHH says that UK politics' loss was most certainly a significant gain for the world of hearing impaired people here in Australia and especially the indigenous people of the Northern Territory for whom Mary continues to be a telling spokesperson.



Jacqueline Mooney, Vice-President of the Deafness Association of the NT is seen here making the presentation of the Libby Harricks Award certificate on our behalf to Mary at a special meeting in Darwin.

Mary has reported that the certificate has pride of place in the office and she was very proud to accept, stating that it was the greatest honour she had ever received.

Mary Salter was nominated by the Deafness Association of the NT. The supporting letter perhaps says a few things about Mary that she has not said herself:

Mary is now in her 81st year. She became President of the Deafness Association in 1987. She has been much involved in creating awareness among migrants about rubella and its dangers for pregnant women and their unborn babies. The Deafness Association working with the Victorian Deafness Foundation has produced a video in several Asian languages as part of the National Childhood Immunisation Program. The figure of 25% non-immunity amongst migrant women in the early 90's has dropped a significant 10%. The Deafness Association of NT was awarded the Jenner Bicentennial Award for the professional health organisation which has done the most to promote immunisation throughout the country.

Mary also successfully lobbied for many years for improved ENT services in the Territory where there is a huge incidence of hearing loss among indigenous people. Aboriginies make up 27% of the Territory's population and about half of their children and a quarter of their adults are left with significant hearing loss due to untreated middle ear infection.

One of her current interests is improving access for hearing impaired people and especially for indigenous people in the NT Justice System where there is a great need for both interpreter services and assistive listening devices.

In 1998 Mary Salter was awarded the NT Outstanding Volunteer Award to add to her achievements.

Nominations for the 2001 Libby Harricks Achievement Award will be called in the November issue of hearing matters. This award is open to anyone over the age of 25 years living in Australia. The nominee must be hearing impaired, but communicating orally.