

SHHH AUSTRALIA INC.
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hearing matters

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**Confronting challenges with
courage and humour**

Meet **LEN ULRICH**,

Winner of the 2001 Libby Harricks Achievement Award

LEN'S STORY

The winner of the annual Libby Harricks Achievement Award is announced at each SHHH AGM. Nomination is open to anyone resident in Australia who has a hearing loss and has successfully fought to rise above that loss to live a full and productive life.

The winner for 2001 was Len Ulrich, Secretary of the Blue Mountains SHHH Group.

One of the 'conditions' of the award is that the winner should tell his or her own story as an encouragement to others. This is Len's story ...

Born in West Ham, London, England in 1937, my early years that I can remember were spent in air raid shelters or watching hundreds of planes going over my house and bombs falling.

My sister and I spent 1940 and 1941 as evacuees at Newton Abbott in Devon. It was a terrible time for me as a 3 to 5 year old; I suffered cruel punishments for things I did not understand. My sister, Mollie, who was eight years older than me, kept telling our parents to take us home. Just before Christmas in 1941, they rented a house at Luton in Bedfordshire and we were all together again.

My Dad had been gassed in World War I and was not called up for duty. However, just six months after we arrived at Luton, he died of massive lung cancers. We stayed on in Luton with my Mum working at a printers and Mollie and I going to school.

I loved school and took an instant liking to arithmetic as it was called then. I learned to play the viola and joined the school orchestra and a Luton orchestra called the Congreve Junior Orchestra. We travelled all over

southern England. I did suffer from exam nerves, but the teachers were understanding and helpful. I became Head Prefect in my last year and left at age 15. Then the school encouraged me into an accountant's office at 25 shillings a week.

I was also active in church life at this time, being a member of the Boys Brigade, the Sunday School and the Choir. It was in church that I first began to notice that the sermons were fading in loudness. At home, I would say "Ay?" when my mother spoke to me and she would reply "Orses eat 'ay". Then I would say "What?" and Mum would tell me "He made steam engines"!

My mother and her brothers were hearing impaired and now it looked as if I was going the same way. There were no tests; no one in the National Health Service was interested in those days so nothing was done. Our finances were such that we could not investigate further ourselves.

Mollie had married with a family of her own. Mum was suffering acutely from a TB hip which eventually put her in a wheelchair. There was only me at home to look after her. The job with the accountant had to

go when I was offered twice the wages to work for the butcher where I had worked while I was at school.

I found that while serving customers, I sometimes had difficulty because of my hearing. When I was 18, I had my National Service callup and failed my hearing test hands down. This finally got some action and I was sent to the Luton Hospital where I was fitted with a body hearing aid. I promptly put it in my pocket and just carried it about everywhere. Customers would say, "Put your hearing aid on Len", and I would for a short time and then put it back into the pocket until someone nagged me about it again.

I married in 1962 and my Mum died in 1963. We had a daughter and a son before emigrating to Blayney in New South Wales in 1966. I worked in the boning room at the Blayney abattoir for nearly two years, working my way up to foreman. The family grew to four children with the birth of another son and daughter.

During this time there was no need for a hearing aid because the cooling system at the abattoir was so noisy, it was impossible to talk anyway. Certainly there was no ear protection worn by anyone in those days. In 1968, the boning room closed because of a severe drought and jobs were hard to find in Blayney.

I went to Email Ltd in Orange and secured a job in the machine shop of the whitegoods manufacturer – a change of occupation I loved. Again, there was no need for the hearing aid because of the surrounding noise.

But wait! Within three months, I was elected Secretary of the Orange Sub Branch of the



Len as a boy in Luton - 1946



Len (far right) with the Mayor of Orange and the President of the ACTU Bob Hawke - 1978

Australian Society of Engineers, the dominant union in the machine shop. I still worked in the shop, but now I had to negotiate with management on behalf of the ASE members at Email.

Now I *did* need a hearing aid.

I went off to Angus and Coote, had some sort of a test and got another body aid for \$300 which helped me for a time.

In 1970 I was appointed, at the request of my members, a full time Secretary/Organiser for ASE, based in Orange and responsible for an area stretching from Katoomba to the South Australian/Queensland border. I had to fly in all manner of aircraft very often and found it did me no good at all. As a child I had not even been able to play on the swings without feeling sick. I was prescribed pills but they only seemed to leave me with a bad taste in my mouth.

My hearing loss increased rapidly, but I battled on with the body aid. A very common refrain was "Turn that thing up Len!"

1976 was quite a year. I had been representing the union on the gas pipeline from South Australia and there were several

hair-raising incidents involving light planes. Then my marriage broke up and for a short time I lost my children.

At the end of the year, I found myself having a cuppa in a donut shop in Orange with Marj whom I had known for some time, when suddenly everything spun around and I could hardly stand, overcome with nausea. Lo and behold, Menieres had entered my life.

Marj went with me to Macquarie Street in Sydney to see a Dr Mac Halliday. He did tests and said there was nothing which could be done except medication and injections to help restore my balance when needed.

However, he was amazed at the quality of my speech and urged me to keep working as he felt that would make good use of the hearing I had left and would keep my speech active. He did say that my concentration would be about 20 minutes in an hour and then would taper off. He was so right! If I really concentrated at a court hearing or conference for up to three hours, then I would be mentally exhausted because I had used up 'nine hours' so to speak. Courts of that day had no

assistive devices and there could be as many as 20 of us at the Bar Table – try that for an exercise in lipreading when you all have to sit facing the Judge or Commissioner.

Some conferences with companies could involve 30 or more people so the old refrain was "Turn that thing up Len!"

The wonderful thing was that all the folk I dealt with knew about my hearing problem and made sure that I knew what was going on because I was the one who had the facts and figures necessary for the case in question.

As I said my actual job was Secretary/Organiser for the Australian Society of Engineers for the Western Division of NSW. But in the 15 years I was in Orange, I was also...

- President of the Orange Trades and Labor Council
- Member of the Orange City Council Industrial Promotions Committee
- Chairman and Director of Taskforce Cooperative Ltd
- Member of the Central West Apprenticeship Promotion Committee



Len at a Union mass meeting - 1980

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- Director of the Central West Group Apprenticeship Scheme Pty Ltd.
- And with Marj, in charge of the Old Time Circular Waltz Dance Group and a Singles Group called Turning Point.

It was a busy and fulfilling time, but things were becoming very difficult. Marj had to drive me everywhere when I couldn't fly as I needed someone who knew how to return my balance to normal when things went wrong.

I was told to retire in 1983 but refused. I have nothing but praise and love for Marj and our children for the manner in which they co-operated to enable my so-called 'soldiering on' to happen.

In 1985, at a court hearing in Sydney whilst I was making a submission to a Judge on a redundancy case, he stopped me and asked me three questions which I answered and then carried on with the submission. That evening when I was reading the transcript of the day, I noticed that what I had answered was not relevant to what he had asked. My hearing had really let me down badly. Everyone involved knew me well and no one ever said anything to me about it afterwards, not even the Judge. The next day I put in my resignation to the ASE.

It was a happy retirement, but I found that I could not stay in Orange. For 15 years, I had been in the front line for radio and television on local issues. I was now not able to be in the same position. For the umpteenth time, I proposed to Marj and she accepted to the children's chorus of 'At last!' We were married on the 16th of November 1985 and moved to our new house in Springwood – just two Darby and Joan pensioners.

Retired life started brilliantly. I was now with the National



Len (back row right) with SHHH Blue Mountains Group - 1998

Acoustics Laboratories (now Australian Hearing) and they fitted me with my first behind-the-ear aids. I joined the Springwood Pensioners and attended the Baptist Church. I did a bit of work here and there for the church and cleaned the Neighbourhood Centre, but it was not always easy to hear.

An Expo in Springwood in 1989 introduced me to SHHH just by

picking up a leaflet. In 1990 I sent in a membership application just as the first meeting of the Blue Mountains SHHH Group was to be held. There I met Charles Jones, Peggy Hull and Libby Harricks and WOW, could these people talk about hearing loss and devices!

There is no doubt that two things stuck in my mind about these folk – their genuine vitality in



Len with his wife Marj (on left) and sister Mollie - 2001

helping the hearing impaired and the amount of time they freely gave in helping people. It had to rub off onto me.

My church was the first test. I asked for a loop to be put in and when they installed one shortly after, it was a great thrill for me to go and hear everything. I felt I was getting the same message as normal hearing people without missing every other word and trying to make out what was being said.

I have made some wonderful friends through the SHHH Blue Mountains Group; I treasure them all and we help each other. It is sad when someone comes along to a meeting and tells us that there is nothing anyone can do to help them. Sometimes we are able to persuade them to try; sometimes they go and are never seen again.

In 1996 Menieres gave me my worst 12 months ever. I spent weeks confined to bed having attack after attack. I could not go anywhere because movement just set me off again. In the end it meant I had to go to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and that I had to have a balance test.

Sometimes even bad things are funny. One part of the balance test is being hit 30 times on the head with a rubber hammer with an electrode attached and the computer producing a graph. In my case it produced nothing. They did it again and still nothing. They checked the computer for a malfunction. Finally the staff and Marj agreed that the real problem was that I had nothing between my ears and they all fell about laughing to my amazement.

The final diagnosis was that my ears are badly damaged and I could have been born that way. I have one daughter who has a hearing loss but the other children are fine as are all the grandchildren.

I can now travel by car if I sit in the front as if I am driving. I

cannot travel by train. I cannot go out after dark and it is often said that our house is always lit up like a Christmas tree. The medication which has rescued me from Menieres attacks is Diamox tablets and for me, they are blooming marvellous.

As I finish this article, I have new decisions to make and maybe new challenges to confront. I find it hard to use the telephone despite having both a volume control phone and a TTY. I am investigating cochlear implants, but I have fears about a reaction from my Menieres. I have looked at

after me in my 'wobbles' as my Menieres' attacks are known in the family. That support has been generously and lovingly given. Now Marj and I have moved into a retirement village at Springwood and we plan to enjoy more of our lovely Blue Mountains.

It is an honour to receive the Libby Harricks Achievement Award for 2001. I recall very well the encouragement I gained from Libby in the short time that I knew her. I hope my story will provide some of the same encouragement to others.



Len receiving his 2001 Libby Harricks Achievement Award at the SHHH AGM March 2001. Left to right: Richard Brading, SHHH President, Peggy Hull, Marie Glass, nominator, and Len.

digital hearing aids and worry that I may lose volume. I need a remote control, but must consider the cost of over \$750 for a remote compatible with two new digital aids. However, I know I will work my way through all this.

I consider I am a walking advertisement for managing a hearing loss – in my case, a 92% loss – and I am determined to go on making the most of my life and the hearing I have left. But you can see that I have always needed lots of support to achieve anything, especially in looking

Len is one of the Blue Mountains SHHH Group stalwarts – an ideas man, an organiser, a 'doer' and a motivator. The Group is one of the most successful SHHH Groups outside the metropolitan area. It works hard to raise public and Council awareness of the needs of hearing impaired people.

Nominations for the 2002 Libby Harricks Achievement Award will be called in the November issue of hearing matters. Think now about someone you know who can set another example for all to follow.