

THE JOURNAL OF SHHH AUSTRALIA INC.  
Self Help for Hard of Hearing People

*WITH  
COMPLIMENTS*

# hearing matters

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**Elizabeth Burgess**

Winner of the 2003 Libby  
Harricks Achievement Award

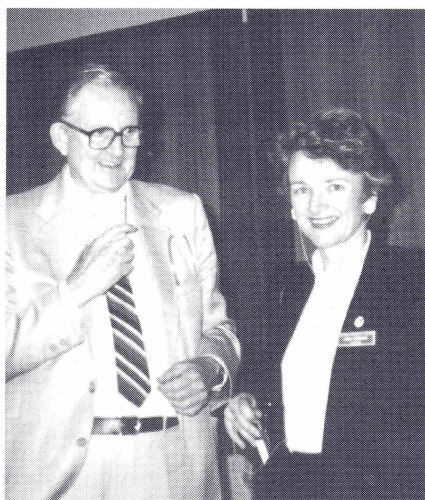
Elizabeth Burgess is the fifth recipient of the Libby Harricks Achievement Award. Here she recounts her fascinating story.

# Meet Elizabeth Burgess



*I was very surprised and honoured when I was informed that I was to receive the Libby Harricks Achievement Award for 2003 as I had always admired Libby for her ready smile, 'get up and go' attitude to life and for her dedication to SHHH and to the Deafness Forum.*

I had known Libby since the early 1980s when she and Mary Sparke started up the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Hearing Impaired Group which later became SHHH Australia Inc. She was often humorous but ready to listen to other people's points of view and also very helpful. As the second President of SHHH, Libby established the first Professional Advisory Board and my husband, Vic,



*Vic Burgess with Libby Harricks trying out the wireless FM aid in Canberra, 1988.*

was a member for the first seven years from 1987. Libby was always willing and eager to try out and use the available assistive listening devices, whether an extended microphone for the hearing aid, an FM system or the TTY and so acted as an excellent role model for other hearing impaired people.

I was born with a profound hearing loss as the result of maternal rubella but I was two before my deafness was discovered.

My mother taught me to speak and to lipread with the help of a speech therapist's notes. She used to teach me by placing me on a high bench in the bathroom facing her, as she noticed that I was more aware of sound there because of the room reverberations. I was four before I was considered big enough to wear the bulky hearing aid available.

My mother used to talk to me all the time and encouraged my younger sister and brother to do the same. In fact, as I was the eldest child, I used to think that my hearing siblings would acquire a hearing aid as they got older.

It was not until I was about seven or eight years old and found a small book called 'Bringing Up Your Deaf Child' that the penny dropped that I was a different child! I was not upset at all as Mum treated us the same as far as possible as she did not want to saddle

me with an extra handicap of being a spoilt child.

I was 13 before getting the more compact body aids and I graduated to the behind-the-ear aids 20 years ago. They were more convenient again, although I feel the body aids did have the advantage of enabling me to monitor my voice more easily as the microphone was worn at chest level and picked up my voice more directly.

I was 20 when I had a telecoil fitted into my hearing aid and that helped with listening over the telephone. The old fashioned black phones of those days were easier for hearing-impaired people to hear than the ones nowadays, even with the induction coil attached.

I was two when I went to a kindergarten for the deaf three mornings a week for auditory training and I attended a normal kindergarten the rest of the week to maximise my contact with hearing children. I proceeded to hearing classes in primary and high schools and always sat in the front rows to make it easier to lipread the teachers.

During the primary school years, I attended the OD (Opportunity Deaf) classes one hour a week for speech therapy. It was a happy time for me as I seldom encountered any nasty persons either at school or elsewhere.

When I was about 13, I became so self-conscious about my hearing aid that I



*Elizabeth, aged 1 1/2, with her father Jack Huxtable.*

took the opportunity of my class being a 'wandering class' to sit anywhere but in the front row during that year. Of course, my schoolwork suffered and I was only allowed to proceed to the next year on probation.

This taught me a lesson, and I sat in the front row after that and my marks picked up.

It was not until I started doing my Arts Degree at Sydney University that I struck real problems in understanding the lecturers and taking notes at the same time. There were no notetakers in those days, although students sitting nearby were often willing to let me copy their notes.

I was very restless, however, and enjoyed an active social and sporting life at University and so I never graduated!

I became a Library Assistant with CSIRO National Standards/Radiophysics Library and enjoyed my five years there until I left to marry Vic who worked there as a physicist. (Joan Hansen, Epping SHHH Group's Minute Secretary was the Librarian of the Reference Section at CSIRO at the time and later became their Head Librarian.)

Vic installed a loop system around our house before the birth of our first baby, so that I could hear her cry and so I could hear the doorbell and telephone ring and listen to the television. It was marvellous and gave me a wonderful feeling of independence knowing that I could hear the sounds at the time they occurred and respond accordingly. My auditory training rapidly improved from using this loop on a constant basis.

After my daughters Ann and Robyn started school, I became active on the Ladies Auxiliary committees of both the primary and high schools. I produced the primary school weekly newsletter, organised the high school clothing pool and produced the local Girl Guides monthly newsletter.

I am telling you this to let you know that being hearing impaired is no obstacle to being a committee member for these hearing organisations.



*Elizabeth with daughters Robyn (left) and Ann and husband Vic.*

It was hard work but I also had lots of fun interacting with the others and I learnt a lot from these activities. I also typed Vic's thesis for his Master of Science degree plus his numerous and various articles on the wireless hearing aid.

*I feel it is very important to let strangers know you are hearing impaired and that they need to face you and speak clearly.*

I worked for four years in a TAFE college in the late 1980s helping hearing-impaired students with their reading and writing difficulties. I was also on the Access Committee of Ku-ring-gai Council for three years in the mid-1990s and only left both the TAFE and Council because of Vic's worsening health.

Over the years, since my late teens, I have spoken to groups of trainee Teachers of the Deaf as well as to parents of hearing impaired children.

I find modern inventions such as the computer, the fax machine and TTY a marvellous help in enabling me to contact friends and business and

government organisations. I love captioned television for now I can keep abreast of current affairs and watch movies.

One day, after Vic and I had escorted his cousin and her friend, who were both hearing impaired, to their tourist coach on a busy street, I chastised him for not talking to the friend. He explained that she was not using her voice at all. I was surprised as I never noticed because of the heavy traffic and so was just automatically lipreading her!

That hit Vic really hard. He realised that not many hearing-impaired people would be able to cope in noisy situations as they would not necessarily have acquired the lipreading skills that I had.

This led to the development of his induction-field wireless hearing aid to enable people to hear speech against background noise and this later became a joint CSIRO-NAL venture. Plessey was awarded the contract for developing the aid, which became known as the CALAID-FM aid. As Vic's aids were short range and relied on the capture effect of the nearest sound, they were not subject to interference from other radio signals. The commercial FM systems available at the time had much longer ranges and therefore were more susceptible to interference.

When we joined the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Hearing Impaired Group, Vic made a powerful portable loop system plus an extra speaker so that the members could follow meetings regardless of whether they wore hearing aids or not.

It was when I first purchased captioned TV as well as the TTY that I started writing letters and contacting various TV stations and organisations asking for programs or advertisements, particularly of the community information kind, to be subtitled. I suggested to the ABC that its program 'The Investigators' be subtitled and told them how necessary it was for Deaf and hearing-impaired people to be aware of unscrupulous practices. I pointed out that these same people could not lipread the back of heads or voice-overs!

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A good sense of humour is also necessary for sticky situations where misunderstandings can occur because of one's hearing loss.

One incident my family still laughs about was when I misunderstood them talking about cockroach baits. I told them, to their horror, that I kept them in the freezer. They were much relieved when I produced the hot cross buns to show them!

Another time, when I was learning to drive a car in an industrial area, I heard a siren so I pulled over to the kerb to let the vehicle pass. I saw many people gathered on the footpath, munching their food and staring at my auntie and me. I then realised that what I heard was the signal for a smoko and not the siren of a fire engine or an ambulance!

Having a hearing-impaired mother does not seem to have adversely affected our two daughters, Ann and Robyn and they have always been a good support to Vic and me especially during his time with Parkinson's disease. Ann has a PhD in astronomy and is working as a research officer with Sydney University Psychology Department in the division of vestibular disorders. Robyn works for Australian Hearing as an audiologist and obtained her Master of Audiology Degree shortly before Vic's death last year. Robyn is now happily married to Matthew who is the editor of a computer magazine.

I feel it is very important to let strangers know you are hearing impaired and that they need to face you and speak clearly to facilitate lipreading and listening. Most people will cooperate with you as it saves them from continually repeating themselves.

I am grateful to my family, as well as to all my friends and other relatives for all their help and goodwill over the years; without them, I would not have been able to receive the Libby Harricks Achievement Award! I also wish you, the readers, all the very best as you overcome your various hearing impairments and enjoy a full and rewarding life.