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Karen Dempsey

**Winner of the 2006 Libby Harricks
Achievement Award**

Karen Dempsey Libby Harricks Award

“There are people in our lives we encounter who make their marks. Those who leave some indelible influence on whom and what we will become and some of us are lucky to meet someone whose presence in our lives makes such a difference that our life would not have been what it was destined to be without them”

To me Libby Harricks was one of those people. I first met Libby many years ago when she put her little microphone up to me and introduced herself. Several years later we were both members of the National Working Party on Captioning, a group formed to get more captioning on television for deaf and hearing-impaired viewers. The National Working Party worked extremely hard for many years and I’m sure Libby would be thrilled to see the amount of captioning that is now available, not just on television but in movies, videos, DVDs and live theatre performances. We had some great times as part of the National Working Party and kicked up our heels at the annual Supertext Captioning Awards.



Karen as a child at Menindee Lakes

I was born in the outback country town of Broken Hill. The eldest of two children, my brother was born 3 years later. I was born with normal hearing and went through my early school years as an A-level student achieving good marks in my exams.

Growing up in Broken Hill meant that family holidays were usually camping trips to the nearby Menindee Lakes or along the Darling River and at times to Mildura and Red Cliffs camping grounds where we used to have the time of our lives swimming in the Murray River.

It was after one holiday in my early teen years that I picked up a virus that left me pretty sick for several weeks and it is thought that it is one that caused the damage to my hearing.

I was in High School at the time and a dictation test was part of half yearly exams. A teacher asked me if I was having trouble hearing, because even though my spelling was all correct, I had written the wrong words. So I was sent off to Adelaide for a specialist appointment and a hearing test. The specialist told me that, yes, there was a hearing loss there, but not to worry too much about it, because I probably wouldn’t need a hearing aid until I was around 40. Well, that suited me just fine, because at that time the last thing a teenager needs to be told is that they need a hearing aid which is big, bulky and ugly. I managed quite well with my high school studies and achieved good results in my school certificate; I even came second in my year for English. My Home Economics teacher asked me to consider staying at school to become a cooking teacher, but I’d had enough of lessons and exams and I just wanted a job so I could buy myself a record player.

I left school and obtained my first job as a Shop Assistant at Broken Hill’s largest Department store – A J Benjamins. I was put to work in the kitchen department, where my job was to make sure the glassware and crystal display was sparkling every day and I blew my first pay packet on the much-wanted record player. I was also being taught to type by a friend, as I really wanted to work in an office, and my lessons would consist of a shoe box being placed over the keyboard with a hole cut out for my fingers. If Jeanette were with us today, she’d be pleased to know I’m still a pretty good typist.

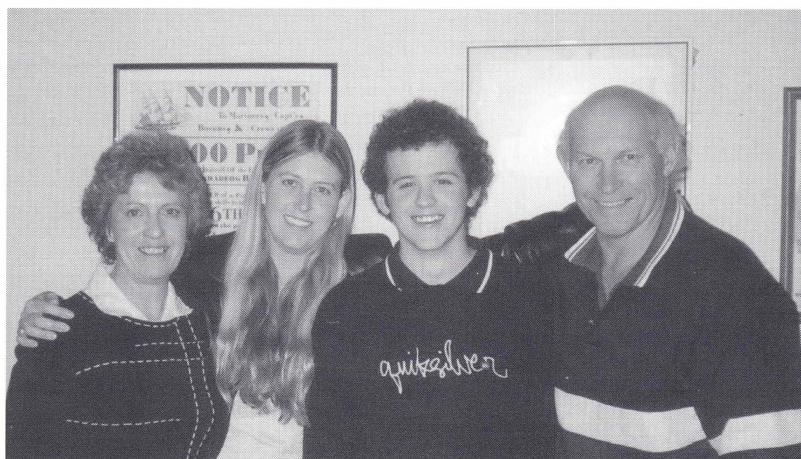
I soon learnt to type and this led to a job in the office at Benjamins as Secretary to the Credit Manager for several years before I was fortunate enough to obtain a dream job with the Department of Attorney General & Justice at the Broken Hill Court House where I was in charge of the Birth, Deaths and Marriages section. I loved every minute of my job and being the only female in the office, I was rather spoilt by my male colleagues.

It was during this time that I met my husband, Dennis, who was a police constable. We used to chat in the corridors while he was waiting for court business.

Dennis and I left Broken Hill in 1973 and moved to Newcastle, as he had been transferred in his job and I managed to obtain a transfer to the Newcastle office of the Public Trustee. We returned to Broken Hill in 1974 for our wedding, then came back to Newcastle, where we have lived ever since.

I was having some hearing problems, but in the back of my mind was still the specialist's words "you won't need a hearing aid until you are at least 40". My daughter, Megan, was born in 1977. Dennis left the police force and we purchased a small business, which we ran for several years before selling. My son, Mark, was born in 1984. As my hearing was deteriorating by then and Dennis was now working shift work at BHP I used to sleep with one hand in my son's bassinet so I would know when he was awake to be fed. It was around this time that I decided to check out whether a hearing aid would help me. It was an awful experience, however, and I didn't seem to be getting much benefit from the hearing aid I was given to trial: I was told to stop wasting time and go away and get used to being deaf. So I became a stay-at-home mum.

As my children grew up, I was becoming increasingly frustrated at how my hearing loss was isolating me. I used to be the mum who would stand by herself on the sidelines at her son's soccer games, because no-one seemed to want to talk to her. I used to think: "What have I done?" It wasn't me who had the problem - it was those who just couldn't be bothered taking the time to talk to someone with a hearing loss. I was perfectly normal, it was just my ears that weren't working all that well.



Around 1990, I became aware of captioning for television programs and could not believe that such a thing was available overseas, but not in Australia. I wrote a letter to the local newspaper and, surprisingly, it was published. I then received a letter in the mail from the next person who helped make a difference to my life, the then-President of "Better Hearing Australia" (BHA), Richard Davies, who suggested I come along to the local office and have a chat with them. This was my first involvement with "Better Hearing Australia".

At BHA, I found out about the Australian Caption Centre and teletext decoders and I purchased one. At that stage, very few programs had captioning, but one of the programs was "Play School". I can remember setting up my decoder and counting down the hours until 4 pm, when Play School came on. I soon learnt all the songs!

I began doing voluntary work with "Better Hearing Australia" and loved meeting people who had a hearing loss just like me, Libby being one of those people. She was not shy in telling people about her hearing loss and I no longer felt isolated: there were many more people out there just like me.

I was still very keen to get more captioning on television and it became a pet project for me. During this time, I met Elizabeth Burgess, after we both won a competition where we got to watch the filming and meet the cast of the ABC Show "GP".

In 1991, the "National Working Party on Captioning" (NWPC) was formed and I was asked to become one of the group, which comprised representatives from all over Australia. It was after the first meeting of the NWPC that it became obvious to me that I needed to try a hearing aid once again, so I went along to a

different firm, where a much kinder lady helped fit my first hearing aid just a few years shy of my 40th birthday.

The ten years I spent on the NWPC were some of the most rewarding years of my life. I wrote hundreds of letters, met some wonderful people, several celebrities and made life-long friends. When it was finally announced that, from 1 January 2001, all news and current affairs and prime time programs from 6 pm to 10 pm were going to be captioned, it was a dream come true and I went out and purchased a brand new 68 cm Teletext TV set. It's a wonder I didn't develop square eyes, because in the months that followed I watched more television than I had ever watched before.

With television programs captioned, the next step was getting more captioned videos for hire in the shops. Then came the breakthrough of the first open captioned movie in Australia. I traveled to Sydney for the screening and it was just an amazing experience to be able to see a movie on the big screen, follow the story for the first time in many, many years, but also an eye-opener to see so much swearing in a movie. I thought, "well, if it's good enough for Sydney, why can't we have them in Newcastle?", so I began to campaign for screenings in Newcastle. Persistence paid off and I managed to obtain a captioned movie screening of "Swordfish" for Hearing Awareness Week. When the local newspaper did a story, I even got to share the headlines with John Travolta! We now have captioned movies screening three times a week in Newcastle and my husband and I "go on a date" every Friday night to enjoy the movies.



Karen and Professor Graeme Clark

I thought my life became enriched after joining "Better Hearing", but my implant has given me a life I never ever thought possible and that now brings me to another person who has made a difference to my life – Professor Graeme Clarke, the inventor of the cochlear implant.

My hearing was rapidly deteriorating and I wasn't getting much benefit from my hearing aids and I'd become friends with several people with cochlear implants, so decided to investigate whether it would work for me. My ENT specialist didn't think I would qualify, but once again, persistence paid off and he gave me a referral to see Professor Gibson in Sydney. I went through all the tests and then came the words "yes, you are a suitable candidate for an implant". I experienced both a mixture of excitement and being scared stiff and I was so worried about failure that I didn't even tell anyone outside my immediate family and one other person that I was having the surgery. The day my implant was switched on, it was pouring rain and I walked out of the clinic to hear the rain for the first time in 30 years: I could not believe how noisy the world had become! Life became one huge learning

curve. The first few months after my implant were quite difficult coming to terms with all the noises I was hearing and trying to work out what they were. I had some huge emotional moments and at times I didn't like my implant very much at all. It wasn't until a friend with an implant told me that it was like having another child, to name it and get used to it making my life different. So I named my implant "ET" and soon became used to all the alien sounds I was hearing. I came to like it more and more and now I just love it and could not imagine life without my implant.

I was thrilled to meet Professor Clarke at the Cochlear "Break the Silence" Campaign at Aussie Stadium a few years ago and to be able to thank him for his marvellous invention that has given a very rewarding life

not just to me, but many other people.

Since my implant I have done so many things I never thought possible: I've travelled, met some wonderful people and made many new friends. I can use the telephone. I've done many different things. I even took part in a promotional video being made at Cochlear and, last year, was appointed as a "Cochlear Nucleus Volunteer Advocate". I go out and speak to people and community groups about the implant. The sound I just love the most with my implant is wind chimes: the tinkling sound is just magical.

"Better Hearing Australia" still is a very big part of my life: it gave me confidence in my ability and taught me that there is no shame in being hearing-impaired and the importance of telling people of your hearing loss and avoiding the embarrassment that can occur when people don't know about your invisible disability. I've taken on many roles throughout my 15-year involvement with the organisation and was National Vice-President of Administration from 1995-1997. It is through my involvement with BHA that I have been able to meet and work with some fantastic people in other organizations, like "SHHH", where I met and became good friends with Sr Cecelia Creigh. We had a wonderful time in Broken Hill in 2001, where we attended a hearing loss seminar and we became partners in crime, when we sneaked out of the dinner to watch our Newcastle Knights win the Grand Final. CICADA (Cochlear Implant Club & Advisory Assoc.) is another great group of people and I'm currently President of the Newcastle-Hunter Branch. With such wonderful support organisations around, it is no longer necessary for hearing-impaired people to feel isolated.

I have been blessed with a wonderful family: my mum, my late father, my brother and his family, my husband, Dennis, my children, Megan and Mark, who have all had to be my ears at many times.

It is an honour to receive the Libby Harricks Achievement Award for 2006. Libby has left lasting memories on all of us as someone who achieved much and encouraged others to take a step out of her book and get out there and make a difference. We all loved her and miss her very much, but I'm sure that she is looking down on us all and is proud of what she sees.

Karen Dempsey



*David Harricks presents the
Libby Harricks Achievement Award*