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Self help for Hard of Hearing People

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Sallyann Normington - Libby Harricks Achievement Award 2010

Sallyann Normington- 2010 Libby Harricks Achievement Award Winner



My name is Sallyann Normington I am married with 2 teenage daughters and this is my story about my hearing loss.

Internally I struggled with my hearing loss for a long time and I hid it extremely well until I had a bad cold in 2001 and found that my hearing loss had changed. I could not hear anything around me. Everyone was really muffled. My husband would come home and the TV would be up so loud you could hear it out in the street. I finally went to see an ENT specialist who told me in the most direct way "You have otosclerosis, you are going deaf, learn to live with it."

Well I thought to myself "there has to be a cure". I was not about to accept that I was going to be profoundly deaf in my 30's. So I did some research and found surgery as an option: a prosthetic bone put in to your ear and I decided this was going to be my cure. So I researched some more and found an ENT specialist who could perform the surgery.

However, after a few tests to find if I was going to be a successful candidate he discovered that I had a facial nerve schwannoma (tumor) and this is why my hearing loss had deteriorated so quickly. The diagnosis put my whole life in a spin. I was now profoundly deaf in one ear and severe in the other. I was facing profound deafness and major surgery. I decided not to have the surgery but I still had to face the challenges of losing my hearing. My self-esteem and confidence were at rock bottom.

At that point in my life, I would only go to the shops if my daughters came with me. I would not attend any of my girl's school functions. If my husband and I were invited out he would go alone. My husband would hold my hand to cross the road (I had near misses with many cars as I didn't hear them coming). The future for us as a family looked bleak and I did not like who I was becoming. I became isolated and felt very alone.

Then one day, a friend mentioned to me about the Deaflympics in Melbourne 2005. She encouraged me to volunteer. Reluctantly I looked into it and put my name down. I loved every minute of it. I knew when the Deaflympics had finished I had to make some changes. I was fitted with new hearing aids costing \$9,500.00. Two little devices that can fit in the palm of your hands and cost the same amount as a used car. As a family we decided to learn Auslan and then I continued with studying Auslan at TAFE and received my Certificate II. When I was at TAFE I meet a student who worked at Vicdeaf and she helped me become a volunteer.

Little did I know that this was going to be the start of my new life as a Deaf person.

When I started volunteering at Vicdeaf I was extremely shy and reserved. The staff in the Information department opened my eyes up to so many different things. Finally I was meeting people who knew what it was like for me. They showed me different strategies to use and how to educate the people around me. They helped me to accept my hearing loss and to have the confidence and strength to tell people when I met them that I was deaf. For this I will always be grateful. It was then I realized I was not alone. I could feel my confidence growing everyday and the pressure and stress I was putting on myself and my family was slowly being lifted. Communication was to be shared it was not just my responsibility. My family could see a glimmer of the old Sally coming back.

To my surprise I was offered a casual position doing reception at Vicdeaf. Without a blink of an eye I said yes and thought afterwards "how am I going to pull this off"? Well it was easy. I was given an amplified head set, the volume was put on high and I had a list of telephone tactics - I was set. It was then I started to meet people/clients coming into Vicdeaf who I could relate to. I had been where they were. I knew first hand what they were going through and what their families were going through and the changes they would need to make to their lives. I was able to share my experience, show them they were not alone and hopefully give them hope for their future.

After approximately a year of working part time on reception, I joined the Marketing and Fund raising team. In the last 12 months, I have become the Officer Co-ordinator. If you had asked me 5 years ago where I would be, I never thought this would be it- working full time and coordinating a busy office. During this time, I have also been working with the Audiology and Rehabilitation team, as we set up a support/peer group for people aged 20 to 55 who are hard of hearing. There is nothing out there for people like us: we share our experiences, talk about the challenges we face at work, in the community, even at home and we understand and learn from each other.



My journey has not been easy and I thank everyday for the support I have received from staff at Vicdeaf and the unconditional love of my husband, daughters and close friends.