



Corinne Walsh - Libby Harricks Award Winner 2020

It came as a wonderful surprise to learn that I – as a profoundly deaf 33 year old woman from Mona Vale – had won the Libby Harricks Award for 2020. I was nominated by my childhood audiologist and mentor, Lyndal Carter. I want to extend warmest thanks to Lyndal for deeming me a worthy candidate, and also sincerely thank the Board of Hearing Matters Australia for selecting me as the winner. It is a great honour to receive this meaningful, special award.

How and when I acquired my hearing loss is something of a mystery. It seems I was born with normal hearing, and my deafness was acquired sometime during my childhood.

Mum says I always passed my baby hearing tests and seemed to respond to sounds. Around 4.5 years of age, my pre-school teacher told my parents that I was running away from her one day and did not respond when she called out my name. Mum and Dad had indeed noticed I was sitting close to the TV and holding peoples' faces with my hands (in hindsight: so I could read their lips!). I had a hearing test and it was discovered that I had a mild to profound, binaural, sensorineural hearing loss. This shocked and upset my parents, as can be imagined. My younger, 18 month old brother also had his hearing tested in early 1991 at the same time as me and, in another blow to my parents, it was discovered he too had a hearing loss (though in the mild to moderate range). There is therefore likely to be a genetic component to my and my brother's deafness.

Immediate intervention was necessary, because 4.5 years of age is very late for a hearing loss to be picked up in a child. My parents decided to go for behind the ear hearing aids and speech therapy, rather than sign language. My mum and dad were absolutely determined to make sure their hearing impaired children were able to participate in the hearing and speaking world. They regularly sat me in front of the mirror so I could learn how to speak and enunciate, and they read books to me every single night. This is no doubt where my flair for reading and writing comes from. I am truly indebted to my parents for their endless love, hard work and sacrifice.

Thanks to use of hearing aids and other technology, my flair for reading lips and body language, and the strength of my other senses and abilities (e.g. having a good memory!) – combined with the inclusiveness, patience and dedication of family, friends, teachers, colleagues and other people around me – I have been able to do very well academically, professionally, socially and in sports. Throughout primary and high school, I consistently received top marks in my assignments and won many academic awards. I attained a UAI of 95.2 in my Year 12 Higher School Certificate, and placed first in the grade in Society and Culture, Family and Community Studies and Ancient History. I came third in my school overall in Year 12, class of 2004.

My keen interest in societies and cultures led me to undertake a Bachelor of Arts majoring in Sociology and Anthropology at Macquarie University, which I completed in 2008 with a Distinction average. I was successful in securing a place in the 2010 graduate program with the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), and moved to Canberra to take this up. It was while working in the public service that I learnt about the extremely high rates of middle ear infections (otitis media) and hearing loss amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, which motivated me to seek work in academia (a research assistant job at the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra) and also undertake post-graduate study so that I could learn about this issue further. I began a Masters by coursework in Anthropology and Participatory Development (MAAPD) at the ANU in 2013, and completed this in 2015 with High Distinctions for all subjects.



HMA President Christine (left) presenting the 2020 Libby Harricks Award to Corinne Walsh at the HMA AGM



Corinne Walsh - Libby Harricks Award Winner 2020 continued...

I then decided to delve into a PhD at the start of 2016, which I am about to submit for examination next week! My PhD is a holistic, community-based analysis of Indigenous otitis media and hearing loss, using Yarrabah in Far North Queensland as the case study site. When it comes to Indigenous ear and hearing health, we hear a lot from medical experts, politicians and other dominant voices, but not so much from Indigenous community members themselves, especially those who live with ear and hearing troubles. My PhD research reveals that Indigenous people 'on the ground' frame and experience ear disease and hearing loss very differently to the dominant medicalised narrative. The detail is of course all in my thesis, and I am happy to share it with anyone who is interested!

I am not quite sure what the post-PhD chapter holds for me, but I do hope to continue using my personal and professional passions and skills to make a positive, long-term difference to the ear and hearing health of all peoples.
