

## Inspiration

# My Hearing Journey



by  
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A hearing aid for the defective ear solved my problem for almost a decade, when the left ear also succumbed. Without the use of hearing aids I am now profoundly deaf, unable to hear any vocal sounds unless they are screamed at me inches away directly into my ear. The problem was severe. The solution was not a lot better.

Though I was unaware of it, I began to damage my hearing as early as twelve years of age. I spent summers in Northern Manitoba prospecting for gold with my thirteen-year-old brother and a seventy-year-old family friend. We canoed and dynamited our way across the province, hoping to make a strike. We did, but that's another story. At sixteen to eighteen years I worked as an underground miner in Northern Ontario and in Yellowknife NWT, using pneumatic drills and regularly blasting as many as three or four hundred sticks of dynamite at a time. Ear protection was not considered important. From there, I spent seven more years in the field with the CNR, another notorious source of noise, particularly in the dying years of the steam era.

I was unaware my hearing was being affected. A few years later I transferred to Montreal's CN Headquarters working as a project manager, which entailed many hours on the phone and in conferences. My right ear began to noticeably weaken. Because I was left-handed and held the phone to my right ear, my word reception was not

always accurate and people began to complain. I saw no problem because my left ear was still fine for face-to-face conversation and disguised the fact that the right ear was failing. Eventually, now some forty years past, I ended up in an audiologist's clinic. A hearing aid for the defective ear solved my problem for almost a decade, when the left ear also succumbed. Without the use of hearing aids I am now profoundly deaf, unable to hear any vocal sounds unless they are screamed at me inches away directly into my ear. The problem was severe. The solution was not a lot better.

Regular visits to my audiologist were helpful. The difficulty rested with me for the first few years, not the acoustician. I tried a variety of hearing aids, some adjusted for volume, others for clarity - high/low decibel reception, etc. I was convinced the government Behind the Ear hearing aids were of inferior quality and was given two or three superior options to test, each in turn lacking in one way or another. I couldn't convince myself to invest in much pricier devices to get an "aid" that might be only marginally





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superior to the government issue. Many fellow sufferers felt that tiny in-the-ear aids were more effective, but that was not my experience. At some point the audiologist turned me on to the CHIP speechreading classes.

The classes turned out to be a blessing, although improvement didn't happen overnight. I floundered along in class for a year or two. Friends saw little increase in my communication ability. Their inordinate expectations were based on programs they saw on TV. I was getting discouraged, but secretly knew that slow progress was my own fault. I didn't practice except during the weekly class. But one day, almost subconsciously, I realized my regular encounters with others were bringing about change. My strategies were also becoming more explicit. I found myself staring more intently at people such as bank tellers and grocery store clerks. It didn't hurt that I had no qualms about informing them of my difficulties. In fact, many of the regulars I dealt with looked forward to joking with me and would engage in repartee just for fun. We would often laugh uproariously when I told them what I had seen them say compared to what they actually said. In this way, I added to my coping philosophy for folks with a hearing impairment, "laugh at your foibles and the world

laughs with you - hide them and the world laughs at you." Let me give you an example.

At "Hope and Cope," in an area of the gym where only cancer patients are allowed, a middle-aged woman came in, obviously for the first time, displaying beginner's nerves. I went over to her, introducing myself, and asked her what she liked to be called. She was from Poland, had a thick Slavic accent and shyly gave me a name that to me was a melange of incomprehensible vowels and consonants. I asked her four times to repeat it, finally explaining my hearing situation, and asking whether she would mind spelling her name. She was pleased that I cared and we shared a real good laugh at ourselves. She is now a friend and we spend many pleasant moments as comrades-in-arms should.

Over time, I have learned to manage my hearing impairment, but I look with envy at others who are more technically savvy than I, and have found various ways to enhance their hearing reception and understanding. I see folks using devices that allow them, in some measure, to isolate sound sources to meet their specific needs, e.g. T.V., telephone, restaurants, group

discussions, etc. I listen carefully as they describe how such things help and how easy they are to obtain and connect. However, I am, as Justin Trudeau said recently, "left in their dust." Even getting words to show at the bottom of the TV screen for programs so formatted has so far defeated my efforts, although a CHIP friend is helping me currently. So I am hopeful.

However, I do have others who also help. With the assistance of the technical people at MAB-Mackay I have received accessories through medicare, such as flashing light audible doorbells, shake-awake bedroom alarms, sound and light equipped smoke alarms, as well as a telephone system with a volume-adjusting feature. All these devices are much appreciated.

All in all, I am grateful for the help and advice I receive from audiologists, technicians, fellow students and teachers at our weekly CHIP speechreading classes. Without their support, I would feel isolated and alone with my problem, whereas attending the classes and mixing with others of an understanding bent has enabled me to consistently improve my communications with others in all situations. What I once saw as a major complication has been alleviated to a certain extent through participation in CHIP speechreading classes and associated activities. These have become pleasurable and essential parts of improving my daily hearing-related coping skills. I can now approach my eighty-sixth year with a very positive, communicative attitude.