CLAWS AND WINGS:
AN ORAL HISTORY EXPLORATION OF DISABILITY IN DELAWARE 1917-2017

Transcription of video recorded July 28, 2017
Interviewer: Kim Burdick, MA, MPA (Referred to hereafter as KB)
Interviewee: Linda Heller (Referred to hereafter as LH), President of Access Health, Aging and Disability Consulting, LLC & Hearing Loss Association of Delaware
Topics included: Audiology, Sterck School, Assistive Technology, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
Run time: 21:14

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LH: I'm Linda Heller and I'm president of the Hearing Loss Association of Delaware right now.

KB: And, tell me a little bit about your childhood.

LH: I grew up in Massachusetts and I was born with a hearing loss from anoxia. And, I spent most of my childhood in school in New England, in Massachusetts, and then I was three different times in California before I went to high school. And then my family moved back to Massachusetts and I was in high school and college there, so…

KB: And when did they realize you were deaf?

LH: When I was seven years old. I had a teacher notice that I had a problem and nobody really knew it and then I kind of faked my way for a year through hearing screening. And then finally they caught up with me in the hearing screening and found out I had a hearing problem. So that's when I was diagnosed.

KB: So, how did you, how did you get through all those years before you were seven?

LH: I don't know. I was very quiet. I didn't talk with people. I mainly sat in the corner and read books and played games. I lived in a rural area and then one time in the city, so I mainly just was a loner, you know, not engaging or communicating that much with other, other people. Yeah.

KB: What was it like in public school in Massachusetts? Were they…

LH: The public schools in Massachusetts are excellent and the, the issue was, at that time they didn't have a lot of services. There was no special ed services. But the fortunate thing was is that off and on, not consistently, I had speech therapy. I had auditory training, which is a form of listening training. I had vocabulary building and I saw a speech teacher, that's what they called them, and they would work with me and teach me lip reading and different things so that I could hear. So that I could understand words. [KB: Yeah.] So that was, that was probably the biggest help to me.

KB: What did you want to be when you grew up?

LH: Oh! Well. I thought of all different things. I thought of being a writer, a missionary. My family wanted me to be a teacher 'cause my dad said, "You'll always have a job." But as I entered high school and started, got my hearing aids at seventeen, when I was going into my junior year in high school, after about a year I got to thinking about my career and I decided to go to the State Teacher's College. But that didn't really work out with my hearing problem because I would have trouble hearing the students and things. So, I began to think about going into speech pathology. And, that's what I did. And from there, I then turned to audiology and studied that because I wanted to help people like myself.

KB: What about romance and dating and all those things that are important to teenagers?

LH: Well, I didn't really do that. At that point I had gotten my hearing aids, I was going into my junior year, so I had a low self-esteem as a kid and I had a lot of teachers saying things like, you know, "You're a nice girl. You're just not too bright." And, other kinds of things like that. And then I was excluded from some school activities because they said, "You can't hear so you can't participate." So, I was still pretty isolated and trying to, trying to get through school and I loved school! But, I just had a hard time hearing in class, so what happened is I then started to come out of my shell and think about my life. And that's when I decided to do something in the, you know, to help people.

KB: So, how did you meet your husband?

LH: Oh! Well, I was single all my life until I was 42. And, a lot of, you know, fellas that, that dated, when they found out I had a hearing loss, that was pretty much the end of the date! And, and so as a result of that I didn't really date too many people. And then I met my husband at a, where I was living in Delaware. And, he accepted that totally, had no problem with anything. In fact, how hearing aids whistle, he said, "Oh, I never had a girl whistle at me," 'cause [demonstrates her hearing aid whistle sound].

So, he made joke of it, you know, and so, and we had a wonderful marriage, so I was very blessed to have him.

KB: How did you get to Delaware?

LH? How did I get to know him?

KB: To Delaware? Well, both.

LH: Oh, yeah. Out of graduate school, I went to graduate school in Indiana on full scholarship, fellowship. And I majored in audiology after being a speech therapist for a couple years in the public schools in Massachusetts. And then I got offered this scholarship, so I, I decided to go to school in Indiana and got my Master's degree and then I thought, "Oh, I guess I'm gonna have to earn some real money now." And, so I heard about this job in Delaware and I had a number of job offers, 'cause at that time there were not women audiologists. And we were among the first. And so I had some good job offers but I decided to come to Delaware because I really wanted to learn more about deaf people and do more of aural rehabilitation type of audiology. So, that's why I took this particular job in Delaware. Yeah. And I had no family or friends or anybody here when I got here.

KB: And it was Sterck School?

LH: Yes, it was the, at that time it was called the Margaret Sterck School for the Hearing Impaired and then it later became the Delaware School for the Deaf, yeah.

KB: And how long were you there?

LH: I was there for 6½ years and I was the first audiologist in the school and the first woman audiologist in Delaware. And, it's been a wonderful, wonderful career.

KB; What did you do after Sterck?

LH: From there I was offered a position as Chief of Audiology and Speech Pathology at the Veterans Administration Center in Wilmington. And I helped develop that department because at the time they had no audiology there because audiology is a post-World War II profession, so people were just gearing up in the '70s for that. And, so, I was there and I did audiology and speech pathology 'cause I was dually certified. So, I just did both and I built up the audiology department. So, and that was a great opportunity. And then from there I had my private practice in audiology and I had that for about six years. Seems like six years is a magic number. And then I thought, "Well, I'll go back to New England and live happily ever after." And so I was looking for a position up there and I got offered a position as Director of Marketing and Rehabilitation for the Newport Hospital in Delaware and from there I was Chief Operating Officer for the HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital, it's now called that, in Toms River, NJ. And then from there, trying to get back to Massachusetts, I became Assistant Vice President for a national rehabilitation company and was in charge of six states in the Midwest.

KB: So, what do you do now?

LH: Oh, boy! It seems I'm very busy now. I retired from state government in 2010 as the planner and policy advisor for the Division of Services for Aging and Adults with Physical Disabilities, and helped start that program because the legislation had just passed in 1995 to add Physical Disabilities onto the Aging piece of the department and so they didn't have anybody with disability background and expertise. So my job was to develop that side of the agency and build it up and develop the policies and programs to support people. So I was there for 15 years and when I left I started my own consulting company, called Access Health Aging and Disability Consulting, which I still do in addition to the Hearing Loss Association, so.

KB: So, were you involved at all in the passing of ADA or IDEA?

LH: I was, yes. I, back in the '70s I was very blessed in that I was asked to be part of the delegation for the White House Conference on the Handicapped, as they called it then. And that was before the ADA. That was in 19, I think, 74, somewhere around there, before the IDEA. And out of that White House Conference came to be the recommendation from that, the major recommendation was that we <u>have</u> an Americans with Disabilities Act. And so, after that, all the advocates in all the states started advocating for that.

And I was part of all of the advocacy for that and very blessed to have an opportunity to do that. So, I was involved in the ADA from before its inception, really.

KB: And how have you seen the changes in other people's lives, and yours?

LH: Have I noticed changes? Yeah, sure! Yes. It's so much better today, but we have a long way to go. I think there's a lot more awareness now about it. We still have some work to do. We still have some attitude issues. We still have a little work in every area.

But, the definite change is that the laws have made it much better for the people. It's important that every person advocate as much as they can to preserve and hold on to what we already have.

KB: Is there anything that you still find challenging due to your disability?

LH: Yes. Having your, your, having difficulty with people with soft voices, group meetings, like council meetings, 'cause I'm on like seven boards and councils. And so I really have to pay attention to it, to every, the meetings. And, right now I have a project from the Hearing Loss Association called "Let's Loop Delaware" to try to promote hearing loops in conference rooms in the state, public and private, to make it easier for people who are severely hard of hearing or deaf, or have cochlear implants, or have hearing aids, or whatever, to hear in private meetings, but also in movie theaters and churches and doctors' offices, pharmacies, the whole thing.

KB: And what's a "loop"?

LH: The hearing loop is a, it's a magnet. It's inside your hearing aid. And the magnet inside your hearing aid matches the magnet that goes in the loop. And the loop is a wire and inside the wire is a magnet. And so when the magnet inside the hearing aid matches up with the magnet in the wire loop, that either goes around your neck or goes around the room, then you can hear so much better because it makes your voice go directly into my ear and cuts out all of the background sound, like the fans running and other people talking and papers, papers moving and all that sort of thing.

So, it's a fabulous technology, very popular and common in Europe, but not here in the United States, so that's one of the projects that we're working on now, so.

KB: Do you, do you feel that you're treated equally with everybody else your age?

LH: Not really all the time, no. I don't think there's anybody that has lived that hasn't had some form of discrimination. And I think it's important to know that and to realize that when you're discriminated against, for some reason, whatever, or excluded, in our case with people who are deaf and hard of hearing, a lot of times they just don't ask you or they just don't include you or they don't repeat things. They don't want to sit near you. I mean, I could just go on and on. But I think the important thing is, is education. This is, they're usually people who don't understand disability. They don't understand hearing loss. And most people don't know what to do and so they're afraid.

So, your job as a person with a disability is to help them be educated about themselves, not to get so upset, but to say, "Here's an opportunity to explain my disability and what issues." And second, what they can do to help, because most people want to help us, but they don't know what to do. So, communication is the disorder of hearing loss, and communication is 50/50. Both sides have to communicate about the communication disorder! So, if you use that as an opportunity, then you have a really good relationship with that person and they learn a lot and you're both better off.

So attitude is so important, to have a positive attitude, not a complaining or negative attitude because that just turns people off.

KB: So, you were practicing self-determination at an early age, right?

LH: Yes! I guess it was. We didn't have a name for it, but my, my mother was very good advocate. She would show up at school if they didn't do something that she wasn't real happy with. I mean, she didn't go up there all the time. But, if she saw me being discriminated against she went up and she went up to the principal's office and talked to him and got the teacher, whoever it was in there, and had meeting and it never happened again, whatever it was, so. I was very blessed with the mother that I had.

KB; It certainly rubbed off on you.

LH: Yeah, a little bit, yeah.

KB: So, if you had a magic wand and you could change anything, what would it be?

LH: You mean in my life, or? [KB: Or both.] In both. I don't think I'd change anything about my life because I think I have been so blessed to have this disability in a way. It has given me my life, my passion. It's given me friendships. It's given me so many things to do and people to care about. I have a perspective on life that I think would not have come as soon as it did. I think I have a lot more empathy for all kinds of people, not just people with disabilities but older people, people…immigrants, every kind of person you kind of look at that person as a <u>person</u>, not as, not as a label. And I learned that early on, I think, because of my own disability.

And, so, I wouldn't really change anything about my life.

I think there's things that I would change about some of the way that we advocate and that we do things to make it, make it better. We could be more effective. So there's a lot of things we could do in the policy area and programs. But, I really wouldn't change anything about my life because it's just been, just such a great career and family life and everything, so I'm truly blessed, yeah.

KB: And, if you, somebody was going to write a biography of you, what would you like people to know about you?

LH: Well, it's sort of like a question about, "What do you want on your epitaph?" [KB: Yes.] I think: "She came. She flew. And she conquered." I think one of those three, or all of them, would be fine. Just, God has been so good.

KB; That's great. So, that's all, folks!

LH: That's all, folks!

KB: Anything else you want to say for the good of the cause?

LH: Oh! Just, I sort of alluded to it, but to encourage other people in what they're doing not to give up, you know. To press on. To when you have a discouragement or you have a failure in some way, you haven't been able to do what you wanted to do, whether it's a policy matter, it's a personal matter, is to use every experience in life as a learning opportunity and to try to bring that learning and that experience and that perspective to other people to help them, but also to help yourself.