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Hanging with the HoHs

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Gael Hannan

There's *nothing* like an intimate gathering of 150 people with hearing loss. A little bit on the noisy side, but that's what exhilaration sounds like: people—whose sole, mutual goal is to communicate—connecting to and understanding what's being said, regardless of who's saying it.

The recent annual conference of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association (CHHA) was held in my birthplace, Halifax. I'm sure that audiology conferences are the same as consumer conferences in that they are exhilarating but exhausting. After two full days of board meetings, informal but passionate late-into-the-night discussions about hearing loss, two days of workshops and plenary sessions, and a seemingly never ending flow of nourishment, I staggered back into the real world. Exhausted but exhilarated.

This was my 20th anniversary of attending the CHHA conference. In 1995, I was five-months pregnant and looking for support on how to be a good hard of hearing mom – or at least one who wouldn't damage her child because of things not heard, simple things like cries for help. At that conference, I met my first hearing loss hero, Cindy Gordon, who was there with her six-month-old child. Cindy calmed my fears, gave me ideas and became my friend.

Spending a few focused days with people who share *your issue*, which in my case is hearing loss, is like knocking on the door and being admitted to your own Emerald City. It's a world of possibilities, discoveries and solutions to problems that plague us on the outside – in the real world where our communication needs aren't always met. It was a short week, jam-packed with emotions and epiphanies – especially for the many people attending for the first time. But even for regulars like me, getting together with other people with hearing loss is continuous affirmation that I'm doing things right as a person with hearing loss. And it's a *safe* atmosphere.

Saying pardon loses any stigma it might have in the outside world. No matter how many times you say pardon, there is no irritation or eye rolling and an immediate response is usually guaranteed. Although if you say it more than twice to the same comment, your communication partners may rephrase their comment, or shift seats, or do something to help you understand better.

Empathy and laughter go together. As we sat down to dinner at the closing banquet, a friend admitted that in a pre-banquet shower, he had that heart-stopping moment when, washing his hair, he encountered his hearing aids. I asked him if the water hadn't sounded just the tiniest bit louder? We felt badly for him – after we stopped laughing.

Almost all conversation focuses on hearing loss – personal histories, living with it, technology, etc. It's the place where people will listen to your stories. They are honour-bound to do this, if they have any hope in hell of getting you to listen to *theirs*.

Batteries are another hot topic of concern. "*How long do yours last?*" This is a common question. Anyone, usually a newcomer, who volunteers that they save battery life by NOT wearing their aids

all the time, may draw incredulous stares and the polite suggestion that not wearing hearing aid batteries is as logical as *not* breathing so you won't wear out your lungs. You need to breathe – and you need to hear.

Vanity is redefined. Hearing aids, streamers, and cochlear implants are not something to hide but to be glorified. Hearing aids are admired, fondled and coveted for their size, shape, colours and amazing capabilities. People look at each other's heads curiously to see if the other guy has something we want. *Hmmm a silver one…wow, how neatly it nestles behind her pinna….oh man, look at that beautiful navy-royal blue CI against the white of her short hair.*

Meetings involving hearing loss people never start on time. The captioning is being adjusted, the text on top needs to be a different colour, the loop listeners need to be distributed, people are encouraged to turn on their telecoils to take advantage of the loop and someone doesn't know how to do that and, oh, too bad, it turns out they don't have telecoils in their aids. But, once we are set up, we are so good to go, with information flowing so naturally and freely that we forget we have any communication problem at all.

A fact that every hearing care professional needs to know: your clients will do better in their life with hearing loss if they can, even once, make that connection with other people like them. And what's more, you will be a better hearing care professional if, even once, you attend a consumer conference or meeting. You will learn more than you thought possible – because you don't know *everything*, right? – and we will be *very* happy to see you there.

Adapted with permission from "Hanging Out with the HoHs", HearingHealthMatters.org, May 26, 2015