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The Dr. Ricketts Known To Many By His First Name Todd

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Back in 2001 when applying to graduate schools, I read a short published piece in *The ASHA Leader* titled, “Digital Hearing Aids: ‘Current State of the Art’” by then assistant professor at Vanderbilt University, Dr. Todd Ricketts. I was 21 years old at the time and somehow just knew I had to put in a graduate school application in hopes of studying and training with this individual. With hard work and study, as well as perhaps good fortune, I found myself a year later moving to Nashville, Tennessee to start the Master’s degree program in Audiology at Vanderbilt.



After beginning my study and clinical training, the opportunity to work as a graduate research assistant in the Dan Maddox Hearing Aid Research Laboratory, directed by Dr. Ricketts became available during my first semester. The memories I recall are too many to describe them in a few words briefly. I vividly remember the camaraderie of the fellow students I worked alongside in that one, albeit large sound booth and control room in which we all huddled. We conducted a lot of hearing aid programming. Then, we completed paired comparisons of sound quality and unaided and aided speech recognition in quiet and noise testing, primarily on directional microphones and noise reduction processing technology. The computers and the math I liked which impressed on me

love and apparent necessity for studying acoustics! In addition, I continued to try and carry a confidence in the expression that “Words make worlds,” which I later learned is foundational to the study of linguistics. With just the addition of the prefix ‘psycho’ meaning the study of human interpretation on the harder science of acoustics and the softer science of linguistics, the fields of psychoacoustics and psycholinguistics emerge.

Dr. Ben Hornsby, a very recent Vanderbilt PhD graduate himself, was the research laboratory coordinator at the time for whom Dr. Ricketts had served as his dissertation advisor. Both gentlemen were aspirational regarding spreadsheet mastering of directional polar plots and the ANSI Speech Intelligibility Index as well as localization and speech recognition measurement scoring, data conversion, analysis, and graphing. In Dr. Ricketts, I found a person with whom I realized a sort of obvious compatibility. About a year and a half later, I was accepted into one of Dr. Rickett’s positions as a PhD student. I began to not only carry out the work of his planned research studies but to formulate and design my research questions and projects. Around this time, if not from the beginning of working in the research lab, he asked that we call him Todd instead of by *the* Dr. Ricketts. The Vanderbilt school requirements were that each PhD student complete three separate research projects as part of the degree requirements, which were the 1st year, 2nd year, and dissertation project. Fortunate enough to have already had the research experience of working in the same research lab for 2 years during the Master’s degree, I completed the 1st year project by the end of the 1st year in the PhD program. Somewhat ironically, given its name of 1st year project, new PhD students do not often accomplish this task.

In hindsight, the 3.5 years I spent in the PhD program were as short to me as the 2 years in the Master’s program. Like most students, I had doubts about my passion for research at the end of that 1st year. In my case, I spent the summer constructing a robotic arm to swing and hold a telephone handset placed near a hearing aid worn behind the ear for a digital feedback suppression study that included measurements of gain headroom (additional gain before feedback) and hundreds of paired comparisons for sound quality assessment with subsequent data entry, conversions, and analysis for each study participant.

The stress relief of daily 2–3 mile runs or a workout at the physical activity center were certainly helpful at the time, and on rare occasions, Todd would also go. In 2004, the Vanderbilt Audiology program earned a #1 ranking for Audiology programs in the country just edging out the University of Iowa where Todd had received his training. As another Vanderbilt professor put it, I felt good to be at what felt like the mecca of audiology. Over the 5.5 years, I spent many weekdays and a few weekends in either the research lab or his faculty office, talking through research data, an upcoming peer-review submission, or a review of published articles. In our best year, the research lab had about 10 industry-sponsored research studies by 2–3 hearing aid company grants in various stages of completion. The lab would go out a few times a year on a Friday afternoon for few games of billiards/pool as a socialization activity and kind of a way to additionally acknowledge all of the work well done. Somehow Todd found the time to publish about 5 peer-reviewed articles a year, complete grant summaries, new grant applications, and several trade journal publications, and even teach multiple amplification 1 – 3 doctoral level classes. All of this is remarkable, as it still is in retrospect today. In that way at least in my eyes, Todd was Herculean. Todd, also being quite tall, gave practical realism to the famous quote of Isaac Newton: “We can see further because we stand on the shoulder of giants.” Any realities of this is certainly true because of the merits and applications of his research which, invariably, had clinical application and salience. Despite his workload, perhaps because he enjoyed the work so much, he was almost always of a jovial spirit.

His laugh from down the hallway was unmistakable.

His laugh and work ethic are the most enduring characteristics I recall and still see in Todd. Since graduation, he has continued to be available for occasional in-person visits or e-mail correspondence. After graduation, when needed as an additional mentor on a Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Career Development Award grant I received as a new researcher, he graciously offered his time and expertise to fulfill the role as a hearing aid researcher based in the USA on request of the Central VHA Rehabilitation Research and Development office as a condition of funding.

His textbook, *Essentials for Modern Hearing Aids* authored in 2019 is now used in many amplification courses worldwide. In using his textbook for the first time during a recent semester in the *East Tennessee State University* Doctorate Audiology program, the style and personality of the writing is reminiscent of Todd and his many lessons when I was a student. Todd is a scientific man but also by nature a person to enjoy the moment which, by examining his productivity, many moments must be spent on his work. In many ways, he has for some time now reminded me of the laughing philosopher and scientist Democritus, whose last name is lost to time or either he never had one in the first place. Todd brought his characteristics and personality to work each day in his smile and most audibly his friendly laughs. When thinking of Todd, I recall the Proverb that a cheerful heart (laughter) is good medicine. From him, I learned that improving hearing qualitatively and its measurement quantitatively are also good!

Cheers Todd!

General Disclaimer: The content is solely the author's responsibility and does not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States government. The author has a part-time audiology practice at Johnson Hearing Technology and Communication, PLLC.