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Thinking Outside the Booth

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Editor's Preamble:

Several Canadian agencies were asked to submit overviews of their services and programs that exist in addition to audiological services that they provide. The agencies were asked to concentrate on the non-audiology services and programs and perhaps take us through their offerings as a Deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing client or clients would arrive at their front door seeking services and/or programs.

This issue of CanadianAudiologist.ca has three of these Canadian agencies- Island Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, with their main office in Victoria, British Columbia; Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility (formerly the Western Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing) in Vancouver, British Columbia; and Canadian Hearing Services (formerly Canadian Hearing Society), with main offices in Toronto, Ontario.

Island Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre

Victoria, British Columbia
By Rachel Walters, Victoria BC



Here is an experience I had recently that I wanted to share with you. My 73-year-old mother is having significant difficulty hearing – only natural given her age. We know she probably needs hearing aids but is on very limited pension and is already struggling with rising food costs and rent, so additional dollars for hearing aids is not an option for her. She was chatting with a co-worker, and he said they went to Island Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre (IDHHC) to get a phone for his dad who had the same issue. So I called and made an appointment to meet with Amanda Windle and discuss assistive technology that might help my mom.

I met Amanda at their office which seemed to be humming with activity! She was great and showed me all kinds of assistive devices that could help mom with her TV, on the phone, and even when we are visiting. We decided on a phone to start- Amanda showed me how it worked, set it up, and said that if mom had any problems, she would go to mom's house and show her how to use it! Awesome right?

As I said, the place was busy. Amanda explained that a "speechreading" class was happening that morning and if my mom wanted to join, another session started in January. She handed me a newsletter and asked if I wanted to see what else they did there – I said sure!

We walked through their bright space and I was shown a classroom, kitchen and boardroom area off the main reception. The space was designed so Deaf and hard-of-hearing community groups could use all three areas for meeting and workshops on evenings and weekends. The boardroom has a loop system (for people with hearing aids); a Soundfield speaker system; three monitors because all of their classes, workshops, meetings, events and activities have captioning and ASL interpreting.



Then we proceeded down the hall with all the offices. The first person Amanda introduced me to was Leslee – she works in the family and community program. Leslee was on her way to teach the speechreading class and when I said I might talk to my mom about the class she told me to look in the newsletter and see what else was offered. I couldn't believe what I saw listed there! A workshop with the fire department about home safety for those with hearing loss; a drop-in coffee group for Deaf community members; a technology workshop about Bluetooth & hearing aids; "*Hear Better*" drop-in info sessions every 2 weeks; Bingo and games day for Deaf folks; a special presentation on Tinnitus; ASL classes in the evening for the community; building birdhouses for

kids 4 – 8 years, and tons more!

Farther down the hall in one of the offices, I met a sweet little pup named Alba, her owner Anthony and his co-worker Kristi. They arrange ASL interpreting services and captioning services across the province for all kinds of events, meetings, jobs, and public broadcasts for things like COVID and forest fire announcements on TV. Kristi is the manager of communications and an interpreter herself so she arranges lots of events and activities for the centre and spends a lot of time helping people understand about creating accessible and inclusive spaces and activities.

Then I met Kim who is an employment counsellor who helps Deaf and hard of hearing individuals find meaningful employment, access funding for training and also help people who are working but cannot afford hearing aids to access funding for those as well! She also told me that she supports employers with things like wage subsidy; and that the Centre offers Deaf Awareness Training and Hearing Loss Awareness Training for employers and community groups to provide information when you have someone who is Deaf or hard of hearing in your workplace. Who knew all of this existed!



Next was a room Amanda called the Family Room, a space with couches and chairs; a TV on the wall; a bookshelf filled with resources; and in the corner was a kids' area with small tables, books and baskets of stuffed bears! Amanda explained they partnered with a provincial organization where IDHHC contracted Deaf ASL instructors to teach ASL to families with deaf or hard-of-hearing infants and small children. This room was available to them for their classes if they wanted; the centre also held ASL story time for infants and children; families were welcome to come and use the space whenever they wanted, and members could access the many resource materials available.

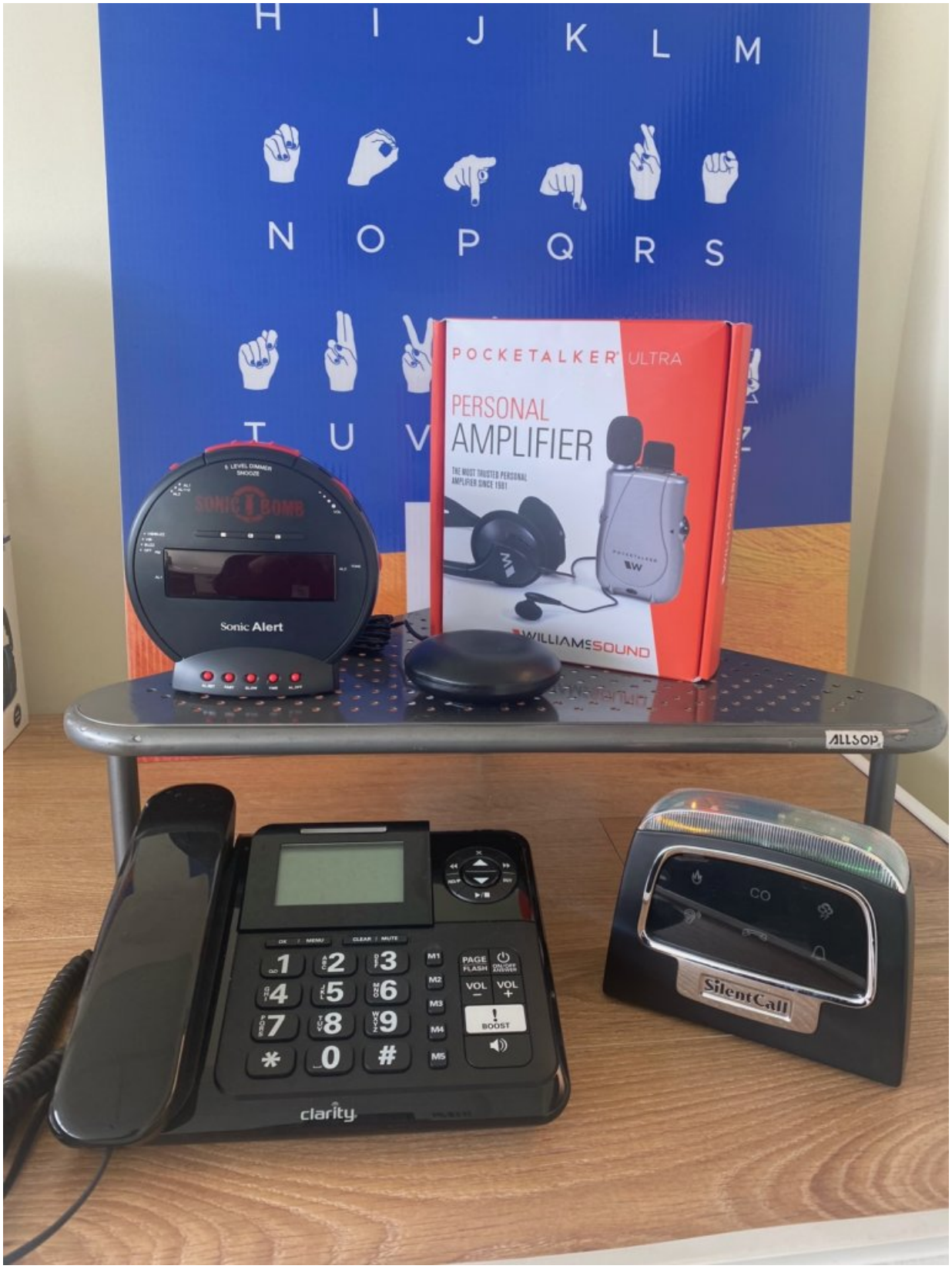
If that was not enough, we saw two more spaces – both were “clinics” that held a medium and a large sound booth – this is where Edward and Brittani, the audiologists, work. Brittani explained that the very large sound booth would provide regular hearing assessment but is also used to provide cochlear implant (CI) assessments too. First she explained what a CI *was*! and then told me that CI assessment were only done at St. Paul’s Hospital in Vancouver until recently when IDHHC was chosen as the only partner in the province to perform these assessments. This fulfilled a goal that Island residents wouldn’t have to go to Vancouver for two days for testing, and having services here in Victoria, will also help reduce the two-year wait list for these assessments. Brittani added that they provide Tinnitus therapy and are the only ones on Vancouver Island to provide Auditory Processing Disorder assessments and management programs! I did not know many of these things before – but I was impressed!



In the 2nd clinic with the smaller booth (still wheelchair accessible so not *that* small!) Edward explained that IDHHC had audiology services like many others, sold every type and brand of hearing aids, but that with access to speechreading, workshops and aural rehab people could receive more support to live successfully with their hearing loss.

Then came the real doozie – he told me about the ***Sound of Change Initiative.*** In 2016 they started an initiative to give refurbished hearing aids to low-income and vulnerable adults and seniors – for FREE! They get full complete assessments; refurbished hearing aids and batteries; access to all the classes workshops, webinars, and events; follow-up and clean & checks; and re-assessments and new aids every four years – for the cost of a $25.00 a year Membership. Edward shared that since 2016 over 800 people have received 1700 hearing aids – many on their 2nd pair! – all *free of charge*.

I was almost staggering back to the reception desk as I struggled to digest all the information I had received! Amanda explained the process if we wanted to see if my mom would qualify for the Sound of Change Initiative. She also told me they had a smaller office in Nanaimo offering virtually the same services, so anyone from Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands can access it. Also, when you donate hearing aids to be refurbished, they send you a personal thank you note; as a non-profit any cash donation receives a tax receipt; and they have a volunteer board if you know anyone interested in joining that way. This place was amazing and I had no idea it even existed!



Fast forward two and a half months. My mom has hearing aids through the Sound of Change Initiative; she is excited about the 3rd upcoming session in her speechreading class; her new "HoH" buddy picks her up so they can attend the bi-weekly drop-in together and then they go for lunch; next week she has a meeting with a young bimodal volunteer to learn about Bluetooth and technology! She has decided to bake cookies for the little tykes' ASL story time every month, and she and her neighbor are knitting and sewing ASL vests for all the family room bears!

My family and I have not seen our mom this *engaged* in anything for years! Mom's quality of life and health are seeing huge improvements – and it is truly amazing! The whole team at IDHHC are professional and so welcoming and warm. They say there are so many more people they want to serve, so here I am trying to spread the word about Island Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre – a unique gem on Vancouver Island that you need to know about!