

*One person can make a difference. If you don't believe that, read on, and discover how one person's determination paved the way to helping many. This is how SHHH groups are started, grown, and nurtured, one person at a time with each person making their own unique contribution.*

## **Lemons into Lemonade**

by Olga S. Roekle, Kalamazoo

My hearing slowly deteriorated because of ear infections resulting from scarlet fever at the age of 12. I managed quite well through high school and college. At the time of my freshman year in college the sulfa drugs came into play, and my infection was stopped. But every so often it would flare up again, especially during a cold, and it still does; so the hearing loss goes on. Then came years of employment and raising a family as well as experiencing my first hearing aids, which helped immensely. Retirement followed at 60. I then began volunteering for one kind of endeavor or another until about 15 years ago, when at the age of 70, I began to experience great difficulty hearing when- ever I was in a group. I had to resign from an important church board because I could no longer tell the difference between the banter and the business! I didn't know how to cope with such a problem. That was a new and frightening experience for me.

I contacted Constance Brown Speech and Hearing Center in Kalamazoo and asked the director if there was a local support group for people in my situation. He told me that there had been at one time, but that it was no longer functioning. However, he went on to say that he had received a communication from a woman that very week asking the same question, and perhaps it was time to begin to think about starting a group. He promised full cooperation of the Center, and they came through beautifully with meeting facilities, copying machine use, postage, and the counsel of an audiologist. The first meeting occurred in March of 1984. It was well attended in spite of the inclement weather and because of the publicity that had been given. Many of those individuals are still with the chapter and have assumed important leadership assignments not only locally but throughout the State.

Thus was born the Kalamazoo Area Self Help for Hard of Hearing People and so began the end of frustration for me and a number of other people.

What are some of the benefits of belonging to such a group? They are so numerous because different people find differing benefits, but I will mention a few that have been very helpful to me personally.

1. I discovered that there were people who were having the same kinds of problems that I was experiencing. I was no longer alone with my hearing loss. We could relate and feel very comfortable about it. With the use of an assistive listening system hearing is no problem. Marvelous!

2. I met beautiful people whom I would probably never have encountered otherwise and these friendships have continued over the years. New members join, so one's circle of friends expands as well.

3. I learned that my habit of smiling in conversation, as if to indicate understanding when I actually did not, was self-defeating. I began to be more assertive in conversations and no longer apologized for asking for repetition when I did not understand. I learned that sometimes one meets people who do not speak distinctly. They may be standing in a shadow so the face is partially hidden, or occasionally in gesturing they cover the mouth and, in doing so preclude lip reading. Misunderstanding or a lack of understanding are NOT always the fault of the hearing impaired person!

4. Group "rap sessions" in which people describe their, personal situations and talk about some of the steps they have taken to meet the challenge. I make good use of these suggestions.

5. There are educational meetings with speakers who can talk with authority about hearing impairment and various subjects that relate to it. There is always much to be gained from these educational meetings. Usually there are handouts that can be studied at leisure.

6. Often I have picked up on hints about my use of hearing aids which have been very helpful and make me wonder "why didn't I think of that myself"! As an example, I learned that after removing aids at night, it is a good idea to leave the battery compartment open to ensure that the battery is not being used and to allow for better evaporation of any moisture in the instrument.