

Hearing loss no obstacle to learning



By Mark James Miller, June 9, 2017

I am open with my students about my hearing loss. I want them to be as comfortable with it as I am, and understand it requires some adjustment on their part, just as it does on mine.

In order to hear them I have to ask for silence in the classroom when another student is speaking, because background noise is a killer when I am trying to listen to someone individually.

I also have to ask everyone to sit as close to the front of the classroom as they can, not always possible when every seat is taken, and a challenge for students who, out of shyness, prefer to sit in the back.

There are also times when I must walk up and down the aisles during class discussions in order to hear what students have to say.

As part of their final exam I ask students to describe their experience in class. What was most important? What did they learn? One student's response in the semester just ended was both touching and inspiring:

"Knowing you are deaf as well motivated me to not be insecure," she wrote. "I thought I would not do good in college, but I just doubt myself too much. I learned that being deaf is not so bad. I now know that this disability can't stop me from achieving anything. I hope other people get inspired by you as I did."

I am convinced one of the greatest things a person can do is inspire others. Showing someone they can accomplish something they did not believe they could do is a feeling like no other.

I had no idea this student had hearing loss. In the past I have had students who were completely deaf, as opposed to being partially deaf as I am, and Hancock College provided interpreters who translated in American sign for them.

Being hearing-impaired is not the same as being unable to hear at all. It isn't as if your world is silent. I can hear, but the sounds are garbled if the speaker is too far away or speaks too softly.

I don't know how that student's hearing loss came about. Mine is not the result of age but of work I did many years ago, around the jet-airplane-level noise of huge machines at the Kaiser Cement Plant in Lucerne Valley, where I worked for six years as a maintenance mechanic and welder.

Years ago I began to notice I was having trouble hearing students at the back of the classroom. A trip to an audiologist confirmed I not only had serious hearing loss but it conformed to the kind caused by exposure to loud machinery.

Hearing loss is more common than people realize. Approximately 20 percent of American adults have some form of hearing loss. This increases to one person in three at age 65 or over. It is also the third-most-common physical condition, after arthritis and heart disease.

Peter Townsend, William Shatner, Bill Clinton, Rob Lowe, Ludwig Beethoven and Thomas Edison are among famous people who have or had hearing loss.

I don't know how my student will deal with her hearing loss as she goes about her life. But I hope and believe she will not let it keep her from attempting to rise as high as she can and accomplish everything she sets out to do.

If my hearing loss can inspire another, then living with it becomes far less of a burden.

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