

Coping with a Hush-Hush Topic

Sixteen-year-old Sophie Shapiro is an energetic eleventh grader who attends a small, private school in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. She is a high-achieving student with a special interest in science, and she excels at three sports, including soccer, squash and lacrosse. Sophie also plays the piano and has studied American Sign Language (ASL) with a private tutor for the past two years.

Sophie's parents first realized she had hearing loss in her right ear when she was three years old; it was discovered during a routine hearing test at her preschool. Sophie resisted wearing a hearing aid and devised other ways of coping with her moderate-to-severe hearing loss. She was nervous about the social consequences of sharing the truth with her schoolmates because she didn't want to seem weird or different.

to be able to hear. Her audiologist urged her to reconsider a hearing aid, but she continued to resist.

It wasn't until Sophie's ASL tutor, Caroline, invited her to the HLAA Walk4Hearing in Philadelphia, that Sophie met other people wearing hearing aids and other devices, and speaking openly about their hearing loss. "It was the first time I was in a setting where hearing help was completely normalized," she said.

Buoyed by the support of her new HLAA community, Sophie began to reassess her rigid position on hearing aids. Caroline, who also has hearing loss, gently coaxed her to give a hearing aid a try, so with her parents' wholehearted support, Sophie finally made the decision to get one — 12 years following her initial diagnosis.

Sophie advocates targeting messages to youthful audiences to help "normalize" hearing loss — as well as the devices that can help — so children and teens have the same emotional support systems now enjoyed by older people.

HEARING AIDS

What Are You Waiting For?

BY BARBARA LEWIS

Keeping Hearing Loss on the Down-Low

Sophie was aware that she sometimes missed parts of spoken sentences in the classroom, and there were also times when she had to ask friends to repeat things she hadn't quite caught in casual conversation. Loud, crowded settings with considerable background chatter, such as busy restaurants, made it particularly difficult for her to understand speech. Her teachers provided accommodations at school, allowing her to sit in the front row, wearing microphones and transparent masks during the COVID-19 pandemic so she could read their lips. Sophie preferred to rely on these accommodations, rather than investigate the benefits that might be associated with a hearing aid, until she was almost 15.

Better Late Than Never

During her annual exam with her audiologist in 2021, Sophie learned that her hearing loss had progressed: she had lost the ability to perceive a frequency that she used

Passing the Whisper Test

When the big day came for Sophie to try her new hearing aid for the first time, she took the "whisper test" with her mother. Her mom whispered in Sophie's right ear both with and without the hearing aid. The comparison was amazing — with the hearing aid, all the whispered words were clear, but without it, she only understood half. The next day, Sophie happened to be late to her Spanish class, and the lesson had already begun. She whispered to the friend sitting beside her, "What are we doing?" and was stunned to realize that she could clearly hear what her friend, who was wearing a COVID mask, whispered back. Sophie says that her hearing aid ended up making her life so much easier, that she was sorry she had put off getting help for so long.

At right: Sophie at the PA Walk4Hearing. Inset, left: Sophie excels at sports. Inset, right: Sophie and her mother, Naomi, at the Walk4Hearing event during HLAA Convention 2022 in Tampa.



A Talent for Activism Suddenly Kicks In

Sophie quickly stepped up to take action: she raised money for HLAA and began advocating for youth who have hearing loss. After courageously addressing her entire student body at a school-wide assembly, during which she revealed her own experience with hearing loss, she organized Dress Down Day at her school. Any student who made a financial donation to HLAA or volunteered at the local HLAA Chapter's Walk4Hearing enjoyed the privilege of wearing sweatpants to school on Dress Down Day. Sophie, who understands the value of inclusion, also organized an ASL club at her school, which 40 upper school students immediately joined so they could learn the fundamentals of ASL conversation. It is now the largest club at Sophie's school.

She also remains active in the local HLAA Chapter, attending meetings, and enjoying the sense of community she has found. Two years ago, Sophie's team raised \$3,785 in support of HLAA, and in 2022, Sophie's Squad, her team of 15-20 family members, friends and classmates, raised \$6,100 at the Walk, getting third place in the individual donations category.

Sophie would like to see HLAA connect with more youth and even include teens on the board of directors. She feels that this would be instrumental in helping to remove the stigma that makes many young people

"I have an app on my phone that lets me cancel background noise. It makes a huge difference in restaurants and the classroom. My hearing aid has also helped me clearly understand song lyrics and watch movies without subtitles."

—Sophie Shapiro

reluctant to admit that they have hearing loss and avoid taking advantage of the technology that can help them.

Making Sure Kids Get the Message

Sophie advocates targeting messages to youthful audiences to help "normalize" hearing loss — as well as the devices that can help — so children and teens have the same emotional support systems now enjoyed by older people. "Some kids won't wear their hearing aids because they're afraid of getting bullied," she observes. "That has to stop. Raising awareness will make that happen, so I decided to produce some videos and post them on social media."

Below: Friends and family formed "Sophie's Squad" to support her at the Pennsylvania Walk4Hearing event last fall. Photo by Kevin Nash, K.S.N. Images, Inc.

Sophie took the initiative to establish a TikTok account, where she posted a series of videos that she conceived and produced herself. Her popular TikTok videos, which have been viewed many times, dispel some common assumptions. For example, one of Sophie's videos features a classmate pitying Sophie for needing a hearing aid at the age of 16. Sophie responds by doing a happy dance to demonstrate her delight in having a device that helps her in so many ways. You can watch Sophie's TikTok videos by downloading the free TikTok app and searching for her username, "hearinghub."

Hearing Aids are a Game Changer

Sophie also attended the HLAA 2022 Convention in Tampa, Florida, where she learned more about cochlear implants and the latest hearing assistive technologies. At the convention, she was introduced to a waterproof hearing aid, a new technology that features more up-to-date capabilities than her first device, and she was fitted with it in December 2022.

"Until you try a hearing aid, you really have no idea how beneficial and convenient it is," Sophie says. "I take mine out before I go to sleep and charge it overnight, so it's all ready to go the next morning." Sophie emphasizes that adjusting to hearing aids can take the brain a couple of days, and their tendency to amplify the softest sounds can be a distraction at first. "I could even hear my hair make a sound when it moved, and at first I didn't know what it was," she laughs.

A Sound Decision Can Be Life-Altering

After enjoying the benefits of wearing a hearing aid for the past year and a half, Sophie has some mature advice for anyone who is still on the fence about getting a hearing aid or wearing the one they have: "Don't wait. You have absolutely nothing to lose by giving it a try. You'd be amazed how it can change your life!"

Tips for Teens

Noise induced hearing loss can be prevented.

- Wear ear protection at concerts and loud sporting events
- Limit headphone and earbud volume and take frequent breaks
- Ask your parents to have your hearing checked annually
- Even mild hearing loss can affect behavior and schoolwork



Above: Sophie plays soccer, squash and lacrosse at a small private school in Pennsylvania.

Right: Sophie with her grandmother at the Pennsylvania Walk4Hearing

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Sophie's life certainly has changed since she made the decision to get a hearing aid. "I don't have to work so hard at conversations anymore, and I'm also much more open to the idea of accepting help from others than I ever used to be." **HL**

Barbara Lewis is a blog and magazine writer and television screenwriter. She also has many years of award-winning corporate communications experience, ranging from video scriptwriting to advertising and marketing communications copywriting. She has also worked in book and magazine publishing and contributed to a published children's book. Barbara has worked on the crew of a popular children's PBS TV series, "Wishbone," and she has also researched and written 10 episodes of a prime-time documentary series entitled "The Genesis of Healing" for a cable network. One of her feature film scripts, "True North," has placed in two international screenwriting competitions.

