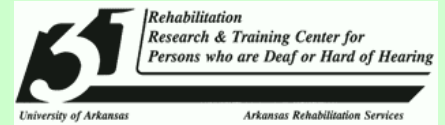




## Selected Proceedings of ALDAcon 2004 “Green Mountain Odyssey”



### **This Way Up: Career Advancement and You!** Carol Menton

**Carol Menton:** I'm hoping today we will hear some stories from my panelists. I selected these two people because of their career stories. After we hear from them, we'll have an opportunity to ask questions or share your own stories. We have Jane Schlau, President-elect, ALDA, and we have Bernie Palmer. He is regional director of region one, the northeast. We have Sharon Sabik, from the University of Arkansas's Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. She is part of a team that researches employment issues and hearing loss. She is hearing herself. She will give a perspective from human resources.

**Jane Schlau:** My hearing loss started when I was in the process of moving up within the New York City Board of Education. I had just accepted a job as a supervisor of special education in the Queens high schools. I was fine the first three, four months, and then I started to need some support. I started wearing hearing aids, and the most difficult effect on my job was I couldn't hear my phones. I reached a point where I really didn't know what to do. Since I traveled throughout the city, daily I would return and have retrieve my voice mail. I couldn't do it. For a message or two, I'd have friends listen for me. Then my husband said to me, "This is ridiculous. Ask for accommodation."

I was really scared. I couldn't ask for accommodations for myself. I could ask for accommodations for my students, after all, I was in Special Education. I could ask for anything for my kids. But for myself, it was really tough. Finally, I went to my supervisor, and asked for a \$10 phone amplifier. I must have been pale and sweaty and shaking when I asked her, but she looked at me and said, "What's wrong with you? We're all in Special Ed. If we can't support each other, we're really in trouble."

I got my phone amplifier. The next year I was promoted to Assistant Principal in the City high school. I was responsible for a department of 300 students with learning and emotional disabilities, plus, ironically, a department of about 40 deaf and hard of hearing kids. When I interviewed for the job, I told the Principal, "I have a hearing loss." I agonized for weeks over the decision to tell the Principal. He asked me if I had a profound hearing loss. I said, "No. it's moderate. I'm fine. We can talk."

But over time, my hearing had gotten a lot worse between the time the Principal had accepted me for the job and next interview, a process with a panel of about 10 to 15 people. I was not yet using an interpreter. I was terrified to ask for CART; I would never ask for CART on a job interview. When I started the interview and I saw my difficulties, I just told the whole committee, "I have a hearing loss. If I'm not sure what you say, I'll ask you to repeat it, please. If I repeat the question myself, which is a strategy I like, it's only to be sure I'm understanding you."

I got the job. Over a two-year period of time, I went from hearing to deaf. I was appointed the end of June and came back to work in September. That summer, I stopped using the phone. In September, I needed a TTY and an interpreter. For my first meeting with my Principal, I had two wonderful interpreters. I told him, "Peter, my hearing is really bad. I need the support of an interpreter." He said, "Fine," and that was the end of the discussion. When I met with my supervisor from the superintendent I said, "I'm really becoming deaf; I need an interpreter." They sent me for a medical to document my hearing loss. In my job many people have to speak to me, so I was given a full-time interpreter. For meetings, I had a team of interpreters. I asked for a TTY; I got a TTY. I needed lights in my office. Six months before I left, the lights were installed. But that was okay. I fought for them. The first thing I did was put everything I needed in writing. When I asked for an interpreter, the interpreter's salary was the same as a teacher's. When I left, my interpreter was making about \$50,000, full time, plus benefits. The Board of Ed. paid her salary and mine. They couldn't fire me. They couldn't tell me I wasn't qualified for the job. They had to provide accommodations.

At one time, just before my Principal left for another job, I told him I was really struggling. He asked, said, "Jane, can you do the job?" I said, "yes." We didn't discuss my hearing loss again for about two years until he retired. Then he said, "I never could tell you this before, but I really admire you." Then, I got a new Principal. She started in February and by June, she had PA system, in her office. She used to test it and make announcements through the whole school of 3200 children and 230 staff members. She'd announce, "Mrs. Schlau, I know you're deaf. Please pick up the phone." I said nothing to her, but about a week later, she said over the PA system, "Would someone please tell Mrs. Schlau to answer the phone." After that, I needed to talk to her. I had many discussions with her. I told her, "My ears are not your problem. I'm accommodated. I have what I need. I am strong enough to tell you if I need something else, if I miss something. Please, it's a non-issue." That didn't stop her. She excluded me. She would tell people that I didn't belong there, That I should be in a special school. She never knew I knew what she was saying about me because anything my interpreter heard, I heard. She didn't know that.

My family encouraged me to file charges, and listening to some of the stories from this morning's workshop, I think I should have. But, it was my choice not to because you can't predict the future. You don't know where you're going to land. If I wanted to move up, I didn't want that bad blood to stop me. I had my job. I became tenured over time. Yet, it was becoming an impossible situation for me to live with. I hate being excluded. I hate not being part of things. I hate being spoken about negatively. I wrote letters.

Finally, the superintendent, this Principal who was my supervisor, and my interpreter and me had a meeting. My principal said to me, "Well, you know, I really do feel sorry for you." My Superintendent said to her, "Get over it. She's doing her job. It's not your business to announce she's deaf, to tell people she works with an interpreter. That's my decision." I loved my job. I could choose to ignore her, focus on my department, on my students, and my staff, and do the best I could, but I couldn't live that way. I was depressed, miserable. It took me about three years to leave. I was getting my doctorate. I really wanted a high-level administration job in a school for the deaf. That was my goal. I had about six or seven interviews over three years. This year, I got a wonderful job at the American School for the Deaf. I have a file of all the stuff I experienced in my former job, mostly negative, but I have it, if ever.... And now after interviewing many times, not being deaf enough, being too deaf, I have found a place I'm hopeful I will fit in.

That's my employment story. I feel I have been through a little war, a lot of battles, won some, didn't fight others. I believe what's helpful is knowing you're making choices. If I chose not to fight, that was my choice. If I told people on an interview, "I'm late-deaf," my choice. My advice to share is you have options. You should never be afraid — I can't tell you how to feel. You can be afraid — I'm still afraid, but, like Dr. Gail said at the luncheon, that fear is not me. It's part of me. It doesn't define me. You sort of get used to it.

**Carol Menton:** Bernie Palmer is the second person I picked for this panel. I actively recruited him. Actually, I like his career. I like warriors. I don't really know how he got there, but I think it will be an interesting story to hear. So here is Bernie Palmer.

**Bernie Palmer:** Hello, everyone. When I was about seven years old, I think I started to consider what I would be doing with the rest of my life and what career I would embark on. My parents are Jamaican. I'm first-generation American. My father worked in the construction business. In those jobs, he arrived home filthy. He left in the morning before we even got up and he was in bed before we got home. I didn't see him very much growing up. So I knew I didn't want to do what he was doing. I wanted to be someone different. When I went to my friends' houses, I saw that their fathers came home in suits and ties. And that's what I decided I wanted to do. Even though I didn't have a clue as to what they were doing, I just knew that it was different from what my father was doing. I grew up slightly hard of hearing.

When I was 18, my senior year in high school, I was working in a restaurant, when a good friend of mine offered me a ride home. We finished work around midnight, and I took the ride home in his nice firebird. That was the last time I heard anything. That night, he totaled the car, hit a telephone pole, and I woke up four days later, deaf. So even though I grew up hard of hearing, I never envisioned that I would be completely deaf. I never even thought that that was a possibility. I never even imagined it, but it did, in fact, change my life. I realized at that point that what was would never be again. I became a recluse. I disengaged from society. I wasn't able to interact with anyone. I lost myself in books. My high school guidance counselor told me about Gallaudet University, and I thought maybe this would be a good place for me. I went to Gallaudet and

completed my Bachelor's degree in history. I went on to a Master's degree from Maryland College in deaf education, and continued my studies to receive a Masters of Science in Special Ed. Administration from Gallaudet as well.

My first job, after my first Master's degree, was at the Maryland School for the Deaf. I worked with MHHI kids, multi-handicapped hearing impaired adolescents. I was working with young boys, teaching them independent living skills, and mostly how to take care of themselves in a very basic way. After two and a half years, I got the job in vocational rehabilitation. Little did I know that the first job that I had, at the Maryland School for the Deaf, was a much more comfortable job for me. I was providing services for low-functioning deaf individuals. At the School for the Deaf, everyone signed. In Voc Rehab, I was the only deaf counselor within the whole state system and communication was a nightmare.

No interpreting services were provided for me, and in those days no CART service existed. I was left to my own devices to get things done on the job. Whenever I went to a State-wide meeting, the state would hire interpreters, even though the interpreters weren't qualified. They weren't able to do the job, yet, I was expected to learn all the different policies and procedures, that go along with the bureaucracy in state employment. So, I asked my supervisor if I could see a list of qualified interpreters. I wanted to be able to screen who I felt would be the best fit for me. The response I got was, "Well, these people are under contract." My response was, "If you can't bend the rules for the contract, then I'm not going to be able to meet your expectations for the job. I am not super human. I mean, I'm deaf, but... I believe the situation could be easily rectified if I got an interpreter who was qualified."

So my supervisor spoke to his supervisor, and they let me look at the list. I chose three interpreters and used those throughout my tenure with Voc Rehab. I remained in that position for five and a half years, and worked my way through the ranks of the state classification system. I married, had two children. I went to the top of the salary range at the level of my position. I felt pretty stuck. I think that a lot of deaf people find themselves in the same boat. They aren't sure where else they can go at their age. This was before the Americans with Disabilities Act, so choices were limited for us.

Then, I heard about a job opening for guidance counselor at Gallaudet University. I applied for the job and fortunately was offered the position. Accepting that position was a fantastic choice for me. I had been deaf for eight or nine years, and my sign language skills were not where they should have been at that point in my life. It was a vocational position working at the Career Center at Gallaudet, on campus, at MSSD. When I was an undergraduate at Gallaudet, I didn't get along with one man but I walked into the interview for the Career Center position, and guess who was on the interview committee? The very same guy. I learned a major lesson that day, that it's really important to never burn a bridge. You never know who is going to pop back up in your life at some other point and offer you an open door.

Later on, I applied for a position in the honors program on the campus at Gallaudet, and that was a fantastic experience because I was able to work with a lot of different bright,

deaf, young kids. In that position, I also had the responsibility for special programs, things like the Young Science Scholarship Program, and the National Academy Bowl, which has become more well known. All of those programs under my administration put me out there, where I really was able to meet and network with lots of different people.

At the same time, I started Peace Studies. In one of my classes, the professor told me that there would be two people competing for my next position, so there may be things I don't know about. The thing is, you never know who is going to be in a position to help you move forward. Now, if there's a person who knows you and your skills and is someone that you can trust, that's what's really important. Networking is also really important. It's really beneficial to take the time to meet people, to go to conferences, really talk to people, listen to them, find out what they do, and establish relationships, because it's those relationships that are going to get you through life and into different positions.

I then moved on to work in a different program at Gallaudet, the English Language Institute, a program that works with the English language abilities of foreign-born students who are deaf. That experience was eye-opening in many ways. From there, I moved into the current position, that I have, which is working with deaf individuals with other disabilities. I feel I've worked full circle in my career. I started my first job working with multi-handicapped hearing impaired kids at the School for the Deaf in Maryland and I'm currently working also with students who are disabled at the college level. If I need to offer some advice, my first piece would be not to burn bridges. Regardless how you feel about a person, that needs to be set aside. Keep your cool. Don't let them know what you're thinking. I'm telling you, I can't emphasize that enough. That's really important. The second life lesson is to network with people. You never know when someone may be able to help you later on in life.

**Carol Menton:** Now, Sharon Sabik, from the University of Arkansas. She is going to talk about the University of Arkansas' program from the vocational rehab perspective.

**Sharon Sabik:** I'm here as a representative for the University of Arkansas, Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. We have many projects going on at the center. Primarily, we look at programs and evaluate them. We talk to consumers. We do quantitative and qualitative research. We have a Masters program for students who want to be rehabilitation counselors with a special track in deafness. I'm currently working on a project with Kentucky Department of Vocational rehabilitation (DVR). The end goal is to improve services, but there are many routes to this. I look at the basic statistics that Rehabilitation Services Association (RSA) gives us. Some of RSA information is the basis of how we evaluate and form theories that put people to work.

We have interactive CDs. One is for consumers and practitioners who want to learn more about accommodations that fit specific work situations and learn how to request them successfully. Another is "Get It." This is a training package for job applicants who are deaf, which focuses on the interview skills.

**Carol Menton:** I want to turn this over to the audience. Do you have questions?

**Audience Member:** Jane, I got the impression that you were a hearing person, and then in a span of two years' time, you lost your hearing and became practically deaf. Did you know Sign language before you became deaf?

**Jane Schlau:** I happened to have a degree in deafness rehab before hearing loss was part of my life. Because of that little bit of sign, I met a deaf couple in my Temple. So every Friday night, we'd go to their house and he tutored me. So yes, I knew some sign, and it improved with my deafness.

**Audience Member:** My question is also for Jane. I wanted to know how much the ADA entered into any of the happenings that occurred within that time frame that you spoke of for your jobs. Was this prior to the ADA?

**Jane Schlau:** I'm deaf four years. My hearing loss started six years ago. This was well after ADA.

**Audience Member:** I've been self-employed, so it's a different kind of work culture. I made my living with hearing because I worked in the recording, music industry. When I began to lose my hearing and the critical judgments about what was heard or not heard was impairing my ability to assist my clients, my relationship with vocational rehabilitation began. At that time, the only option, apparently available to me was to switch careers. I always wondered whether there was such a thing as accommodations for self-employed people where there would be a hearing assistant who could work with my musical skills and help me evaluate what was being presented musically.

**Sharon Sabik:** Every state and every voc. rehab. system differs, but one of the issues for VR is of course emphasizing transferable skills. You may have to get another counselor, if they are not serving you the way you think you should be served. Self-employment is definitely a possibility. However, we stress empowerment and self-advocacy. You should be able to work in your chosen employment, but it may be the one who gets out there and gets it done, whether it's through the VR counselor or other means.

**Audience Member:** It's quite a different story for someone who is self-employed and it requires a different scenario.

**Carol Menton:** You work for yourself; you have to provide your own accommodation. So you have to be creative. Those are my words of wisdom: be creative. Now, before we close, I'm going to ask Bernie, Sharon, and Jane for their last words of wisdom.

**Bernie Palmer:** I say, yes, we have the ADA and the public policies that have helped us a lot. But at the same time, we also have responsibilities. You really need to make it reasonable accommodations when you're asking for accommodations.

**Jane Schlau:** Bernie talked about not burning bridges. When I left my job with my principal, I know I left with a certain degree of self-respect, and if I needed to go back, there's nothing she could say that I did wrong. Pick your battles. Yes, we have the ADA. Yes, we must be assertive. You need to take your fear, know what's there, and speak up for yourself, but decide what's really important to fight for.

**Sharon Sabik:** Do not burn your bridges. I think creativity is very important. I'm a great believer in problem solving. I think there's always a way, and work is people's identity. And it's extremely important, and that's why I'm in vocational rehab.

This paper was originally presented at the ALDAcon held in Burlington, Vermont in September of 2004.