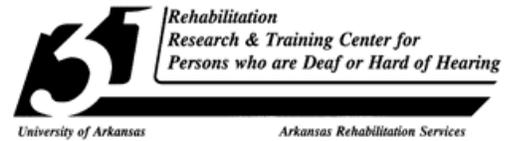




## Selected Proceedings of ALDAcon 2005



# The Power of Positive Hearing: How Positive Attitude and Humor Enhance Relationships

Presenters: LAINE WAGGONER & REX WAGGONER

**AUDIENCE MEMBER to Laine:** Why do you have four ears?  
(Laine was wearing bunny ears on her head.)

**LAINE:** You're the first person who's ever asked me that. Why do I have bunny ears?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** No, four ears.

**LAINE:** Actually, I have six "ears". I have my hearing aids, I have my own ears, and I have my bunny ears.

The motto of ALDA when it comes to coping with hearing loss is "whatever works." I'm doing this to demonstrate that you have to be really assertive if you're going to wear hearing aids that show, or cochlear implants that show, or if you're going to be using assistive listening devices that show and you're going to be shoving microphones in people's faces.

"Whatever works" should be our motto, and we should not be ashamed to do whatever it is that we need.

The other way you can look at my bunny ears is that some people are never satisfied with the way they hear now, even if they have a good hearing aid or a cochlear implant. They're always looking for what I call the magic bullet. Is there something out there that's going to make it better? I get a lot of inquiries from people who are not yet candidates for cochlear implants but they heard about some surgery that would help them so they wouldn't have to deal with the annoyance of handling hearing aids. It's like they're looking for magic ears.

There is a tremendous, tremendous population of us who are hard of hearing. We estimate that there's a minimum of 32 million Americans who have a hearing loss, and we hard of hearing and late deafened folks represent 95 percent of that number. It's only recently that some agencies are waking up to the fact that hard of hearing folks need services for our special needs. We need to learn how to cope, and we must tell hearing people in our families and our communities how to communicate with us and we need to explain our needs.

The crux of our presentation is communication: communication in relationships which includes spouses, partners, family members, friends, co-workers, bosses and helping professionals. We need to educate everybody - because very few people know what hearing loss involves. Many people think that just yelling louder is going to be enough for us. They think that if you wear hearing aids, you should be able to hear, and that if we are going to a group meeting, we're going to be able to follow the sign language interpreter. A large percentage of the HOH/LD (hard of hearing/late-deafened) are like me. We were born in the hearing world, and we're hoping to stay there. We have not learned sign, at least not yet. So, when someone sticks us in a meeting room and only provides an interpreter and nothing to read, we're lost. That's why assistive listening devices and CART are so important.

We feel we all need basic communication and coping rules to help overcome the challenge of communication breakdown. Rex will cover things he feels hearing partners should know. And, we will talk about some of the "positive" aspects of hearing loss and the need for humor so that you will approach your hearing loss challenges in a healthy manner.

Regarding humor, I call him "Dr. Humor". He has a web site with all kinds of funny stuff. He wrote our call to arms: "Grant me the laughter to see the past with perspective, to face the future with hope, and to celebrate today without taking myself too seriously."

Basically, even though we've been married 39 years, we are still "works in progress". Whatever we say or share with you about what we've learned or developed came as a result of roughly 22 years of trial and error with no help, because we didn't know there was an organization that could help us. I didn't discover SHHH until 1988, and I didn't discover ALDA until a few years after that.

Although Rex and I don't have all the answers, and we're encountering new challenges all the time, we try to do it with a sense of fun. We look at challenges as opportunities to problem solve. And when I train others, I stress they should look at each new problem and figure out how to solve it.

We try to think of amusing ways to approach life. Although our organization is called: Hearing Loss Education And Relationships or HEAR. We recently decided that HEAR really means: "Having Extremely Asinine Responses."

Rex also came up with a powerful acronym for what he experiences as the hearing partner.

**REX:** H-E-G-O, Pronounced “He-go”. It stands for “His (or her) Eyes Glaze Over”. You are all laughing because you obviously know what that means.

I have been living with Laine’s eyes glazing over for 39 years. I know what that indicates. It means that nothing I say is being received, her brain is not computing- especially as her hearing decreased. So, I’ve learned that I just need to let her brain rest for a while.

To show why a sense of humor is important, I will share how I discovered Laine had a hearing loss. When we met in 1965, her aid was hidden behind long hair. We worked together in a theater public relations office. I worked incredibly long hours, and before she came on board there was nobody around for me to date. After I saw her resume, and interviewed her, I decided this was a woman I would like to date, and perhaps marry. I had no idea she had a hearing problem.

We went to a Christmas Eve party one night, and we were dancing to very romantic music. I decided to make my first romantic move, so I leaned over to nibble on her ear. Then, I got the loudest feedback you have ever heard! Everybody stopped dancing and they all stared at us. Laine could have been embarrassed, I could have been appalled, but we both started to laugh. We’ve been laughing together ever since.

**LAINE:** After that, we proceeded to share all of our physical frailties with one another, because we knew we’d be together for a long time.

### POSITIVE ATTITUDE:

Why is a positive attitude important? Staying positive reduces stress. We know that stress has a function in our overall health, and there are scientific studies about how stress plays a role in hearing loss. The more stressed we are, the more our brains and our bodies are not able to deal with deciphering sounds and making sense of language.

We know from psychological studies that positive words and thoughts affect our bodies’ immune system. Positive words help create healthier attitudes. So that’s why we named this talk today “The Power of Positive Hearing: How to add Humor and Positive Attitude to Enhance Relationships”.

I studied psychology and counseling because I have a great interest in how emotions and the body are impacted by hearing loss. It's *very* important that YOU understand that and that you share it with your loved ones. Sharing is crucial. Without sharing, the people all around you are clueless. They don't have the information and they are not mind readers.

A leading psychologist who developed a stress test said, "the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive stress." The great old philosopher, Carlos Castaneda, said "We either make ourselves miserable or we make ourselves strong. The amount of work is the same." So one of our by-words should be, "It's not what happens to you, it's how you react to it."

We *choose* to be angry, we *choose* to get upset because that is probably the line of least resistance. However, your goal should be to take a more positive approach and *choose* to be more pro active, *choose* to be more of a problem solver.

Do you readily inform others that you have a hearing loss? If not, think about how you can inform others about your communication needs. Do you say, "I need you to speak more clearly? I need you to face me? I need you to get out of the glare"? If you don't you need to learn how to. If you're hearing and you have hard of hearing relatives or partners, you must encourage them to be more assertive.

If you have a positive outlook, you will actively show interest in a topic so people don't think that you're tuning them out. You will be assertive instead of being angry and aggressive.

A big issue in relationships is learning *how* to ask for accommodation. We can't do it in an angry way. If I shout, "Dammit, Norma, I don't know what's the matter with you. Why don't you speak more slowly and more loudly?" Then what is Norma going to do? She's going to crawl away or she's going to become defensive or ignore me, and she's not going to be very helpful in the future. Negativity and aggression tend to turn people off. What we're looking for is a way to get them to be responsive and cooperative.

So before you say something that's going to turn people off, think: "Is there a better way I can put this, so that they will be more responsive to me?" You must practice being polite, considerate and tactful. This is true for any kind of relationship.

When you ask someone for help, do you tell them specifically what you want them to do? It's not going to be enough to say, "I don't understand you." You need to explain: "I need you to speak more slowly, I think I'll get it then, and it's because of my hearing loss." I'm not being apologetic, I'm being very up front. I'm being assertive. I have the right to ask you to help, because it's *our* communication relationship that is at stake.

Be positive. Think of signals you can use with one another so that you're not constantly interrupting a conversation of a group of people. Remember to thank people when they do something that you've asked and to be *specific* about what it was. "Thank you for speaking more slowly."

We're going to give you a couple of scenarios. To repeat: to be totally negative all the time reduces one's ability to develop coping skills. It reduces one's ability to become more hopeful. That's our purpose in doing trainings, to help people have hope so that

they don't withdraw and become isolated, and to help them so they learn about techniques and devices that they can use.

Helen Keller, was a very famous educator who was both blind and deaf, said, "Without the adventure of challenges, life is not worth living." If we pull away and isolate ourselves, we're reducing the stimulation to our brains. If we're not wearing our hearing aids because we don't want to be bothered, and it's easier not dealing with strange sounds, our brains are not getting stimulated, and we may develop signs of Alzheimer's sooner.

A classic case of negative thinking: someone who's so depressed and negative, they say: "I couldn't hear anyone at the party last night. I can no longer enjoy being around people. I'm never going out again. If my hearing loss gets any worse, my life will be over."

Can you think of some ideas to help them deal with going out in public and hearing in noise?

### ASSISTIVE LISTENING DEVICES:

**LAINE:** In our case, assistive listening devices dramatically changed our social lives.

**REX:** I'll tell you how assistive listening devices changed both our lives. Although we both have theater background, I'm the most gregarious one of the family. As Laine's hearing loss was diminishing over those first 22 years, we began cutting down on going out to see friends, going out for dinner or to the theater. I felt dragged down by that. I began to feel isolated and felt we were losing intimacy. Because of that, I was going through a lot of negative emotions right along with Laine.

So when Laine got her first assistive listening device- a PockeTalker, it allowed her to go out to dinner and parties and cut out a lot of the background noise. After that we were seeing more friends. Laine developed a clever solution for using her device at cocktail parties. She doesn't drink but she'll have the appetizers. So, she clips her FM microphone on the plate and aims that at whoever is speaking, while keeping one hand free to pick up food.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** If you didn't have a plate of food what would you use instead? Would you just use a microphone, moving it back and forth?

**LAINE:** Yes, I sometimes do that. I always have the mike on an extension cord so it is flexible. For those times when I don't feel like waving the mike, I'll clip the mike on the strap of my shoulder bag or clip it to the front of my clothing and aim my chest at speakers.

**REX:** She's very assertive in the way that she uses the microphone to help her understand. She is not threatened by explaining the function of the ALD to anyone who asks. It usually becomes an ice breaker or conversation item. It appears that women are more assertive about their hearing loss than men seem to be. Unfortunately, many men worry about calling attention to their hearing loss.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I feel vulnerable using an assistive listening system in a restaurant or in a social setting because I feel that there is a stigma still associated among some people that my hearing disability equates to incompetence or...

**REX:** Or stupidity. Sad but true for many people. The secret is for you to be as un-stupid and as smart and as good as you can possibly be, and then they won't think that. Most important is your attitude about using it. If you are shy about using the mike, find a way where it's less noticeable. With practice, you won't give a darn. The more confident and assertive you become, the more you'll be able to solve communication challenges. Think of your role as that of educating hearing individuals.

**LAINE:** I agree. You have to take into consideration your own emotional needs and level of comfort. When you use a problem-solving strategy, you will eventually become so bold about using devices that you will become an educator for others.

The first time I used my FM device at a banquet with 10 people at the table, I left it in the middle of the table. Although it picked up some of background noise, I was able to understand the conversation of a lot of the people at the table. They were intrigued by the device. What they all ended up talking about was, "What's that? What do you use it for?" So, I explained its function. Then they wanted to know: "Where can I get one for my mother or some other family member?" Here's a bunch of strangers who are not making fun of me. They see my FM transmitter as a curiosity and think: "Gee, this person is really smart to be using something that is helping her. She's not sitting back and letting the world pass by."

**REX:** There's a certain irony in this. It's usually the men who are really interested in this device that's sitting in the middle of the table. They really want to know all about the new gadget.

#### GENDER DIFFERENCES:

**LAINE:** It's hard to generalize about gender differences. It's true that men are different from women and vice versa. We notice that in conversation. Have you read the books of Dr. Deborah Tannen, a psycho linguist who specializes in gender differences? What she says is that any two people having a conversation are probably talking about two different things. It gets much more complicated if it's a man and a woman, because we come from different cultures.

## NEGATIVE THINKING vs. POSITIVE THINKING:

**LAINÉ:** Let's jump to negative thinking. For example, have you heard: "People are no good, they don't cooperate, and they should remember I have a hearing loss." Or, "Nobody loves me, they keep calling me from another room and I keep telling them I can't hear from that far away."

**REX:** There is a lot of negative thinking based on lack of information about such basics as devices to help with TV listening. We often hear people say: "I'm so sick and tired of everybody yelling at me to turn down the television. It's just easier to get a book and go to my room and read." I can't tell you the number of people who have come to our groups with that negative defeatist attitude. So we talk about solutions and tell them about TV captioning, head phones, and infrared and FM systems. Hopefully, when you learn a lot about those aids yourself, you will share that information.

Negative thinking often appears as denial, when a hard of hearing people says, "I would hear just fine if people would stop mumbling."

**LAINÉ:** We know from surveys of hearing family members, that their chief complaint is the frustration they feel because they don't know how much help to give us. Often hearing people have negative attitudes about their loved ones who don't understand well with or don't use their hearing aids at all.

We need to be constantly sharing with them how we experience hearing loss. No one can be a mind reader. Everyone needs to know exactly what to do. And the only way they'll know is if you explain it to them.

It is estimated that at least 17 percent of hearing aids sold are sitting in a drawer. The recent surveys do admit that most of those aids are probably five years old or older. But, even with today's hearing aids, their life span is four to five years unless they're kept in tip-top shape.

In many households the hearing family members are constantly complaining: "Why don't you wear your hearing aid?" It's a tremendous conflict situation, where one owns an aid, but is not using it. I see a lot of frustrated wives because their husbands are not using their aids.

If someone is not using their hearing aids, you need to probe further and ask, "What about it doesn't work or why don't you like it?" Everyone's goal should be to help people be more assertive about communicating with their dispensers and making sure they get the right adjustments so their hearing aids are not sitting in a drawer.

**LAINÉ:** I once thought negatively about accepting a position as an executive director of a nonprofit organization. I thought: "I won't be able to hear on the phone. I won't be able to hear the people in the board meetings. It'll be way too stressful, and I won't be able to

hear well enough to take minutes.” Does anybody have any suggestions on how I solved that situation? Because I did solve it.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Find somebody else to take minutes?

**LAINE:** Yes, but I didn't do that; I ended up taking them myself. I warned the board up front that I had a hearing problem, and that I was only going to cover their decisions. I also took my FM device with a conference mike and put that in the middle of the table. I was able to hear 12 people then because there was no background noise.

**REX:** Laine had some fears when she went back for her second master's degree in counseling at the age of 65. She used her FM device and she had a personal captioner.

**LAINE:** The program for deaf and hard of hearing students at Cal State University Northridge paid for the CART operator. It was most valuable because I could read, both the comments of the lecturer and my fellow students.

**REX:** Here are a couple of situations where you might identify what's wrong with the negative interaction, and maybe come up with something that's more positive. We meet on the street. We only know each other casually. “Hey, glad to see you. You coming to our party tonight?”

**LAINE:** “You look great. How's your wife?”

Have you ever had that kind of conversation where the hard of hearing person does not respond appropriately? A hundred times a day?

**REX:** For several years I would poke Laine to get her attention.

**LAINE:** In the old days I would say in a very angry way, “Rex, will you stop doing that?” It took a while for me to be able to say, more positively: “A poke scares me.” And to suggest a better way to get my attention.

Sam Trychin has explained that, with hearing loss, our antennae are diminished. We are not aware of people coming up behind us. The unheard approach becomes the scare approach. This is something we need to share with hearing people.

**REX:** After many years of being poked, Laine finally asked me to stop poking. But, in a positive way she suggested that I just put my hand on her shoulder and wait until she can finish what she's doing.

Here is my favorite typical conversation. I come home and say, “Honey, I've just bought tickets for us to go see the Lion King for our anniversary I thought it would be great to take you out for dinner beforehand and really make a great night of it.” and she says...

**LAINE:** What do you mean you're inviting some stranger for dinner?

**REX:** I didn't say that.

**LAINE:** Because of negative thinking I would reply: You said you're inviting some guy I've never heard of, Lionel King, for dinner and you know we like to have a romantic twosome, and I don't like to cook anyway on our anniversary.

But, now I use positive feedback. I say, "I heard you say dinner and I heard you say anniversary. But I didn't get the rest of it. Or I might say, "Did you invite somebody by the name of Lionel King?" And Rex would go on to explain that.

**REX:** We'd clarify that entire situation. But I was doing it with humor. She would finally pick up that she really didn't get the message at all. And we would laugh about it until she got to the point of saying, "I don't think I heard you correctly."

How about those two words you all hate to hear: "Never mind." Don't you hate those two words? I don't think I have ever said "never mind" to Laine for over 30 years. This is how she trained me.

I'm reading a newspaper and mumbling to myself. I might mumble: "Oh heck, they've raised the price of the golf course again to \$100. I'm not going to be able to play golf any more."

**LAINE:** If I would say: "What?" and Rex would reply: "Oh, never mind. It wasn't important", I would have to positively explain that saying "Never mind", implies that he thinks I am not worth his repeating it. Or I might counter with a remark such as: "Well, I won't tell you what happened with the car today or the bank account." If he says, "What?" I will give him a dose of his own medicine by replying, "Oh, never mind."

**REX:** It didn't take me long to catch on.

### BENEFITS OF HEARING LOSS:

**LAINE:** Have you ever thought about the benefits of hearing loss? I share the joy of many people who love to be able to switch them off their aids or CIs in extremely noisy situations.

I have heard audiologists say that those of us with the most severe hearing losses need to rest our ears and our brains periodically. We do not have to wear our hearing aids every minute of every day. The rest of you who have less severe hearing losses may be able to wear them all day without the kind of tension and frustration and fatigue that we feel.

**REX:** I really envy Laine when she can turn off her ears, because I'm very sensitive to sound.

**LAINE:** For instance, I will not stay home from parties, because I have too many clothes and jewelry I want to wear. So when I go, I may take every piece of assistive equipment I own and I may say to myself before I go, "I will be happy if I can understand 10 percent of the conversation." When I come home, I think about my success. If I understood 20 or 30 percent, I'll be happy and will plan ahead for the next gathering. Do whatever you need to do in order to problem solve that situation.

**REX:** At parties, we hearing folks can be really great assistive listening helpers. One of the things that I do when we go to a party, is be very aware of where I stand in relationship to Laine. We try not get stuck sitting. I will usually stand next to her, so that the person speaking will be facing both of us and she can easily read their lips. If that person continues to look at me, because I am a more animated listener, I will simply look at Laine. The speaker has no choice but to also look at Laine. I also try to imperceptibly keep Laine up to date on where the conversation may be going. I feel that I'm there to help without saying anything specific or drawing any attention to Laine's hearing loss.

#### POSITIVE ASPECTS OF HEARING LOSS:

**LAINE:** For me one of the big benefits of going back to school with my hearing loss is that I further developed my assertiveness. So, I'm able to teach others about hearing loss, and look for more occasions to laugh.

But, outstanding benefits are the facts that I can no longer hear Rex snore. Or burp. I don't hear the planes coming into my airport. People don't have to talk behind my back as long as they keep smiling when they face me. I don't hear the teenager next door who has taken up the drums. I can also pretend I don't hear if someone asks me to do a favor or chore. Flying is worry free for me because I can't hear the jet engines.

I've learned to value and appreciate communication. When Rex and I are talking anywhere, I have no choice but to look at him and give him my full attention. I think that must help our relationship.

The goal is improvement, not perfection. You set a goal and decide if you've met it. Maybe give yourself a reward for success.

One way to stimulate the healing endorphins that reduce stress is to sniff or eat some chocolate, or cinnamon, or a peach. And remember, there are no problems, only opportunities to be creative. *What* happens is not as important as *how* you react to it.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** One of the problems that I run up against in trying to understand conversation at a party, is the speaker changing the subject on me. I'm struggling along,

I understand what is going on, and all of a sudden he's on another topic, and I'm going, "What?" Do people relate to that? Is that a problem that others have?

**REX:** Absolutely. We all need a "hearing buddy."

**LAINE:** He may give me a nudge and tell me the topic has changed. But, if I'm feeling assertive enough, I may say, "What are we talking about?" Most of my friends know I have a hearing loss. Especially because I wear my lapel button: "Please Face Me, I Lip Read".

I often explain that word discrimination is a huge problem for me, and hearing the beginnings and endings of sentences is a problem. It depends on your level of comfort. You do what feels right.

**REX:** I want to want to end with one of my favorite audience questions, which was asked of me. We had just finished a two-day workshop in Yuma, Arizona, and a little lady in her 80's, came up to me and said, "How do you handle making love?"

It took me by surprise, and it took me a minute to answer. I could have been very flippant and said "Oh, five or six times a day," but that's not the answer that she wanted. I thought back to when Laine's hearing was really getting very difficult. We would be making love, and I would whisper sweet nothings in her ear. This was pointless because she needed to be able to read my lips.

So, we developed a sign language of making love all our own, which is what I told this woman. Her face lit up, and she went right back to her husband and the last we saw her, they were excitedly chattering away to one another.

#### TO SUMMARIZE:

**LAINE:** Remember, positive thought and behavior change take time and patience. You can't do it all at once. Nobody can be perfect, so what you're aiming for is improvement. Set yourself a goal in a listening situation that you know is going to be difficult. And do it with positive attitude and humor.

Laine Waggoner, MA, MS, an ALDA & SHHH member, has a profound hearing loss. For nearly 20 years, she has educated individuals, couples, groups and helping professionals around the U.S. about the psychological and social impact of hearing loss and effective coping strategies and communication techniques. Her MS thesis was on "The Counseling Needs of the Hard of Hearing and Their Families". She is in the Peer Mentor Certificate program at Gallaudet University.

Rex Waggoner, MA, shares what he has learned during 39 years as Laine's hearing partner by speaking to a variety of hearing audiences and through writing. See his article: "Hearing Loss is Not a Solo Act" in the 2004 ALDA Reader.

## **Humor and Hearing Loss** by Laine Waggoner

*“Grant me the laughter to see the past with perspective, to face the future with hope, and to celebrate today...without taking myself too seriously.” Dr. Stuart Robertshaw, “Dr. Humor”.*

Humor is essential when living with hearing loss and the inevitable communication breakdowns we experience. My own sense of humor has served as an invaluable antidote to the endless stress, frustrations and anxiety that I encounter every day.

I use humor liberally to lighten the atmosphere in my support groups and workshops. It is acceptable from me, as I have been living creatively with my own profound hearing loss for more than 49 years. Jokes and cartoons that view the funny aspects of our foibles, always get laugh.

We who are hard of hearing must nurture our ability to laugh at our misadventures and misunderstandings. Using self-directed humor to relieve tension and laughing with others is an expression of kinship or social bonding. This helps to make family, friends and coworkers feel more at ease with us and members of our team.

Many scientific studies have supported the fact that an optimistic outlook and the development of effective coping skills can help anyone to cope with life's downside. This is because laughter increases the pituitary gland's production of endorphin, a calming chemical which helps to moderate stress, influences memory and concentration, relieves pain and increases work and athletic ability. Some researchers say it also strengthens the immune system.

Plus, a healthy sense of humor helps us to focus on the **positive** aspects of hearing loss. My hearing spouse envies my hearing loss because:

- *I no longer hear him snoring.*
- *I don't hear the planes coming in to land at our airport.*
- *I no longer hear what I used to pretend I didn't hear.*
- *I can turn off my hearing aids at a noisy party.*
- *My friends trust me with a whispered secret. They don't know that I didn't hear it in the first place.*
- *People don't have to talk about me behind my back, as long as they keep smiling while they face me.*
- *I don't hear the teenager next door who plays the drums.*
- *I don't hear if someone asks me to do a chore.*
- *I can't understand telemarketers, so then I hang up.*
- *Once shy, I have learned to value and appreciate communication.*
- *Flying is worry-free because I can't hear the jet engines.*
- *I confronted my fears and explored a new field of work.*
- *I can teach others about hearing loss...and find more occasions to laugh.*

## **How to Stimulate a Positive Outlook:**

Help your body, mind and spirit to maintain and enhance your health. Follow these tips for stimulating your healing endorphins:

- Train yourself to be more optimistic by pinpointing your negative thinking and replacing it with a positive, “can-do” philosophy.
- Use the power of positive self-talk. Tell yourself at least 20 times a day, “I’m healthy and full of energy” or “I can do this”. If you cannot accomplish this on your own, seek the guidance of a qualified counselor or therapist.
- Take a brisk walk. For older folks, at least 20 minutes of aerobic exercise is recommended at least 3 or 4 times a week.
- Smile and laugh as much as possible. Watch amusing movies, stand-up comics or TV sitcoms. Collect funny cartoons.
- Avoid those things that lower endorphins: poor posture or physical condition, too little sleep, worry, chronic pain, stress and “toxic” people who are always negative.
- Sniff or eat some chocolate, peach or cinnamon. This should do wonders.

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