

**Kathy Vesey and Beth Wilson have different sorts of hearing loss, personalities, interests, and aptitudes. Yet, as hard of hearing students who successfully navigated mainstreamed education, they find their struggles were remarkably the same.**

# navigating the hearing classroom with a hearing loss

**SURVIVAL, STRESS, AND DIALOGUE**

*By Kathy Vesey and Beth Wilson*



**Kathy Vesey** grew up hard of hearing as a result of contracting German measles at age 3 or 4. Vesey's hearing loss was not identified until she arrived home from first grade with a note from the principal informing her parents that a loss was suspected. Because she could hear well in the very low frequencies, she was not able to use a hearing aid until after she graduated from college. She was placed in the first seat of the first row, and there she stayed throughout elementary school. She navigated her way through school very quietly, working hard to fit in and not be viewed as different from her peers. Told she should not teach because of her hearing loss, Vesey earned a M.B.A. while directing a large mainstream program in southeastern Massachusetts. For the past 12 years she has directed the Gallaudet University Regional Center at Northern Essex Community College, serving the northeastern part of the country.



**Beth Wilson** had a hearing loss that was discovered during a kindergarten screening. Wilson has no hearing in her left ear and can only hear low tones in her right. She can talk on the telephone if the volume is amplified, but she can't hear it ring. She wasn't able to wear a hearing aid until sixth grade and assistive devices were not available until college. After convincing the dean of the engineering school that she should not be removed from the program, she graduated, went to work as an engineer, and continued on to earn a Ph.D. in electrical engineering. Wilson has been an engineer at Raytheon Company in Rhode Island and Massachusetts since 1983, with the exception of one year, which she spent as the executive director for Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, the national advocacy organization headquartered in Bethesda, Maryland. Wilson says that she navigated the educational system by being very open about her hearing loss and very firm in the modifications she required in the classroom.



**First day of school...**

An eight-year-old Kathy Vesey paused for her mother to capture the moment before heading out to a new year of school. For Vesey, who hid her hearing impairment whenever she could, good grades were “optional,” fitting in with her classmates was “mandatory.”

*Photo courtesy of Kathy Vesey*

**W**hen Vesey and Wilson were tested for hearing loss in their respective kindergartens, they adopted the same strategy. Both pretended that they could hear. Vesey, taking her cue from the response of other students tested in the same room, succeeded. Her hearing was perfect in both ears, according to this exam. Wilson followed the same strategy. She watched the children ahead and tried to memorize how they responded; she noticed that the nurse’s arm muscles twitched when she activated the tone. Wilson responded just like the other children and to every sound—but the ear she

pointed to did not correlate with the ear in which the tone had sounded; the ear she “heard” in was random. Said Wilson, “I was caught.”

Why did we pretend? Why did no one know? Hard of hearing children learn amazing coping strategies. They learn quite early to find visual clues in their environment that will make up for what they don’t hear.

Vesey recalls consulting in a kindergarten class where there was one hard of hearing student. During the observation, the teacher administered a test. The children, seated in a row of

individual cubicles, listened and circled the picture that depicted the word said by the teacher. Vesey watched as the hard of hearing child cleverly and subtly cheated his way through the entire test by leaning back in his chair as if stretching and yawning and glancing at his classmates' answers. His timing was perfect and no one noticed. When the activity was completed, the teacher proudly said that the child had all of the words correct, and was doing just fine in the class. She was shocked when Vesey described what she saw—and that in fact the child did not understand the words at all.

Hard of hearing children face unique stresses as they go through the school system. Here are some that we remember.

## STRESSES

### Sitting at the Front of the Classroom

Ask any adult who was hard of hearing as a child, and he or she will rant and rave about being stuck at the front of the classroom. It feels like punishment. It is difficult to blend in when “Wilson” or “Vesey” is mixed in with the “Andovers” and “Booths.” It may be necessary, but still a lot of information comes from the middle and back of the room, and it is impossible to tell where the voice is coming from and who said what.

### Being Different

Vesey, when she entered her new high school, was determined to keep her hearing loss private. She lasted three weeks! Her grades dropped markedly, but the defining moment was in French class when the teacher gave the class a dictation. Vesey wrote down the first “la” she saw and left the rest of the paper blank. **The desire to blend in can lead children to refuse**

**accommodations. Better a “C” or “B” without the hard of hearing label than an “A” with appropriate accommodations and the label. In the hearts of hard of hearing children, passing—as a hearing person as well as on tests—is mandatory. Full potential is a luxury.**



### Self-Advocacy

On the dreaded first day of class, a hearing student can arrive just in time for the start of class, sit anywhere he or she wants, and only have to do good work and be attentive to be on the teacher's good side. The hard of hearing student, on the other hand, must arrive early, ambush teachers to establish accommodations, and interrupt teachers

when they turn around, turn off the lights, play an audiotope, show a movie without captioning, and deviate from the supplemental material.

Wilson had a teacher that always sat in front of the window. After a few weeks of watching sun and silhouette, she asked the teacher to move.

When the teacher sat at the front of the room, she could see her face and had a better chance at lipreading. Wilson remembers a teacher who insisted on uncaptioned movies and another who provided an exam on audiotope; when she questioned this, she was told she “could sit nearer.” Vesey remembers an interpreter who translated at such a distance from teachers and instructional material that students needed a third eyeball.

Students who develop skills in advocating for themselves and their communication needs are going to be more successful in the education system. At the same time, it's a difficult balancing act to constantly advocate while attempting to fit in and be accepted by one's peers—not to mention teachers. In high school and college, hard of hearing students learn to pick their battles. When faced with a teacher who refuses to provide accommodations or half-heartedly attends to the needs of the hard of hearing student, what are the options? Complain to the principal or dean? Risk receiving a low grade? Change to another class? These negotiating skills are important, especially as students transition to or from high school or college.

Technology is a double-edged sword for hard of hearing people. Technology brings better hearing aids, more assistive devices, captioning, e-mail, and pagers, as well as the means to search the Internet instead of using the telephone. It also brings more speech-based training materials and interactive programs that require hearing for full use. It brings electromagnetic interference into the classroom that can cause problems for hearing aids and assistive devices.

### Lipreading

Only about 25 percent of English is visible on the lips. Lipreading, an important augmentation to hearing, is an art. It is an especially useful tool for those who hear low tones, but not high tones. Sounds that are ambiguous can sometimes be clarified if you see the speaker. For example, the “s” sound and “f” sound have similar low frequency components, yet look very different on the lips. Lipreading requires constant focus and is quite tiring and stressful. By the end of the day, students who lipread are exhausted.



## Listening

At lunch time, Wilson first pretended she didn't feel well. When it was discovered that she wasn't really ill, the school arranged for her to eat in the nurse's office, a practice she maintained throughout most of her elementary and high school years. After a full morning of straining to hear, lipreading, and trying to make sense of partial information, Wilson did not want to face her fellow students in a noisy cafeteria. For hard of hearing people, listening—the act of receiving pieces of sound, resolving ambiguities, and filling in the missing holes—is hard work.

## Isolation

We missed so much conversation. Having asked peers to repeat what they said, the most common response seemed to be, “Nothing.” In upper elementary school, Vesey attended a speechreading class for five hard of hearing students, and for the first time met other kids like her. Our renditions of the “Pledge of Allegiance” were hysterical, but it was terrific to laugh together.

Both Vesey and Wilson turned to sports. It was a way to combat isolation without communication requirements. Surprising to some people, music may be another key component of socializing for hard of hearing students, especially for teenagers. At the school dance, no one can really hear the conversation because the music is too loud. Actually, the louder the better for Vesey and Wilson, who really enjoyed music even when they didn't understand the words.

## Developing a Full Identity

People with hearing loss represent a broad spectrum of hearing ability, coping strategies, and cultural identity. Where do we fit? Vesey and Wilson feel comfortable in both the hearing and deaf worlds. Both learned sign language as adults. Both use the same description of this experience—that they are very fortunate to be accepted by both hearing and deaf “worlds” and that they can enjoy the richness of deaf culture.

Unfortunately, not many hard of hearing people experience this. It is sad when people believe that the greatest success of a person with a hearing loss is to live—or at least pass—every day as a hearing person. Learning sign language did not alter our identities, but rather it offered us another valuable tool in the coping toolbox. Wilson once explained to her employer how and when each of these tools might be used:

- If the meeting is with less than

seven people and she knows all of them, she only requires a hearing aid.

- If the meeting is with seven people and she doesn't know all of them or some have accents, an interpreter is required.
- If the meeting is with more than seven but less than 15 people that she knows, a loop system will work.
- If the meeting is in a classroom setting, the FM will work.
- If it is a large interactive meeting, an interpreter is necessary.
- If the meeting is online, captioning is required.

The point is that different settings equal different strategies and different tools, and to some extent, each tool lends itself to a different identity.

## Teaching the Teacher

Vesey returned from school one afternoon and told her mother that the teacher had explained a new coping strategy. The teacher told Vesey: “Tell me when you don't hear or miss something.” Vesey was puzzled. “How am I supposed to know what I didn't hear?” she asked her mother. Unfortunately, teachers and others often asked, “Did you hear okay?” But the person with a hearing loss is the worst judge of what he or she heard. Our biggest problem is not what we don't hear, but what we think we heard. For people who were born with a hearing loss, what they hear feels normal.

As an adult, Vesey discovered that her fourth-grade teacher was related to the principal of a nearby school for the deaf. She feels that much of her success was due to this teacher's behind-the-scenes coaching. She and her teachers developed a nonverbal communication system. She would give teachers a certain look, and they would automatically repeat and rephrase without Vesey having to raise her hand and ask. This was a huge help—not only was the information accessible, but Vesey also avoided the embarrassment and the stress of constantly asking teachers to repeat.

Teachers need to know the basic facts about deafness, especially that good speech does not equate with good hearing. Vesey lost her hearing after she had started to speak. Speech and hearing are related but they are not equivalent.

## Getting Permission to Teach the Peers

Wilson noted that her most successful classes were the ones where teachers were willing to talk openly about hearing loss. Every student sees the hearing aid and the hard of hearing student's struggle. When the hard of hearing student engages in dialogue about hearing loss with the teacher and class, he or she is more comfortable for the rest of the year. It is also helpful to meet the other hard of hearing students in the school, both for social reasons and to reduce the student's feeling of being “different.”

