Debuting in 1996 at the AG Bell Biennial Convention in Snowbird, Utah, AG Bell’s Leadership Opportunities For Teens (LOFT) program has seen nearly 200 teens participate. Recently, AG Bell, in an effort to determine the long-term impact of the LOFT experience on past participants, contacted alumni of the program. Here’s what four past LOFTees shared about the impact of the LOFT experience on their lives.

Stacey Lim

I’m a member of the inaugural LOFT Class of 1996. There was a great sense of community in our class and our wonderful LOFT counselors were there to lead the way.

While LOFT helped me develop better networking skills, one of the most significant things I took from my LOFT experience was to not let hearing loss stand in the way of my goals. We were taught to be strong advocates by speaking up for ourselves and sharing with others our knowledge and experience with hearing loss. Additionally, I believe LOFT gave me the skills and confidence to grow as a leader within my own community. For instance, in college I started COW4KIDS, a mentoring group for underserved children, and while in my Au.D. program, I served as vice president of the National Association for Future Doctors of Audiology.

During LOFT, we discussed different strategies that we could use to build confidence in explaining our needs to make sure we’d understand the people we talk with – and these lessons have served me well. As an audiologist, one of my biggest challenges is completing speech testing during an audiological evaluation; I must be sure that I can hear my patients’ responses. I employ a variety of strategies with each patient to make sure I can understand them, including using an FM system and explaining to the patient what the FM system is and why I need to use it.

I became an audiologist because I wanted to share knowledge of hearing loss and aural habilitation. I’m currently seeking a Ph.D. in audiology because I want to teach about hearing loss and aural habilitation approaches to future speech-language pathologists and audiologists. It is my hope that these students can share this knowledge with the families they serve.

Today’s teens with hearing loss should know how important it is to understand and embrace the fact that you are your own best advocate. You know the best about your hearing loss and how it impacts your life, and you are in a great position to educate others about hearing loss. Never hide your hearing loss or be embarrassed by it.

Jessica Levine

The most important things I learned from LOFT 2000 in Philadelphia, Penn., were self-advocacy techniques, effective communication strategies and leadership skills. The best part of LOFT was meeting and forming incredible connections with many amazing teens who are deaf and hard of hearing. We made a point of...
Having been profoundly deaf since birth, my life has been a journey to better integrate with mainstream society. Over time, I became frustrated with the limitations of hearing aids and received a cochlear implant when I was 14 years old. Suddenly, I was able to hear the "s" and "f" sounds, distinguish my mom's voice from my dad's and for the first time I could sing along with music without missing a beat! Before heading to graduate school in 2007, I got my second cochlear implant, which gave me a sense of balance and harmony in the world of sounds.

I knew I wanted to give back to individuals with hearing loss and their families. I set my sights on becoming an audiologist and researcher. I graduated from Tufts University in 2006 with a double major in biopsychology and biomedical engineering. Presently, I am a graduate student at Northwestern University in the Doctor of Audiology (Au.D.) program. Three things have motivated me to get my Au.D.: receiving bilateral cochlear implants, my experiences doing auditory research and my love for personal interactions with others.

I love helping peers with hearing loss and their parents better understand the auditory system, current research and the technologies available to them. My personal knowledge and experience as an individual with hearing loss and bilateral cochlear implants, coupled with my technical and advocacy expertise, enable me to connect with patients and offer valuable assistance.

My biggest challenges have been advocating for myself, staying positive and being determined. Others often tried discouraging me from my dreams, telling me that my hearing loss was too big a barrier. LOFT gave me the tools to deal with these challenges – how to be assertive, how appropriate communication strategies can overcome obstacles and that I can accomplish things when I put my mind to it. Another significant key that helped me through difficult times was having an awesome support group of friends who are deaf and hard of hearing and whom I met through LOFT, AG Bell and other organizations.

The best advice I could give to teens who are deaf and hard of hearing is to be your own advocate, be assertive and don't let other people discourage you from accomplishing your goals. Anything is possible if you put your mind to it and tell yourself it will work out.

**Ari Sagiv**

My LOFT experience in St. Louis, Mo., in 2002 was incredible – I loved being around new people who shared something in common with me. I had the privilege of getting to know some of the brightest people in the country and I was extremely honored to be a part of it. One of my best friends to this day is fellow LOFTee Erik Nordlof. Meeting so many amazing people who have a hearing loss like myself helped me to become more confident and accepting towards others. It was also wonderful to talk and interact with the facilitators, all of whom are adults who are deaf or hard of hearing and who have succeeded in life by doing what they were teaching us.

LOFT taught me how important it is to be a good listener. Before LOFT, I hadn't realized the value of keeping an open mind and valuing the suggestions or opinions of others, even if you don't agree with those opinions.

For me, the most important factor in selecting a college was getting the services I needed, which included CART. I believe that making a choice based on that has led me in the right direction. Over the course of my undergraduate study, I realized that I love working in a laboratory, especially in my chosen field of thermal spray. My internship at Pratt & Whitney led me to aspire to a career in the field of thermal spray technology.

The most difficult challenge that I face to this day is being able to understand people who I cannot hear well. Mainly these are professors or classmates with heavy accents. This is challenging because it is difficult to get the person to acknowledge that he or she has heavy accent without offending him or her. LOFT helped me become a better self-advocate to deal with these issues.

I would tell teens with hearing loss to work hard, maintain a positive outlook and always keep goals in mind no matter how bad things may seem. Be prepared to fight for the services you need, and start thinking about college and what you want to do with your life. Most importantly, have FUN with your life and, of course, apply for LOFT! I guarantee that it will be an exhilarating and life-changing experience.

**James Barden**

Attending LOFT in 2004 in Pittsburgh, Penn., definitely increased my confidence. I learned that there were many peers feeling the same things that I did about school and friendships. Most importantly, I had new friends that I could talk to and rely on for support on a regular basis. I was better able to advocate for myself with the knowledge that new friends across the country were doing the same. LOFT turned out to be the foundation on which I built some of the best friendships I've ever had.

After LOFT, my network of friendships expanded almost immediately. I developed a new-found confidence in interacting with others. I realized that having a hearing loss actually contributed to the diversity and range of perspectives in my friendships; surprisingly, people highly valued that.

Without a hearing loss, I would probably be in a very different place; my hearing...
loss helped me to be very discriminating in my choice of schools. At age 15, I was accepted to Bard College at Simon’s Rock in Great Barrington, Mass. Bard offered small classes and close relationships with professors that, while beneficial for anyone’s education, was also accommodating for my hearing loss. After two years at Bard, I transferred to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, looking for a wider variety of classes. I love the diversity that UMass-Amherst encourages in its community. Whether they have a hearing loss, speak a different language or are from a different culture, it is nice to learn in an environment that accommodates – and celebrates – so many differences.

The most significant challenge for me has been integrating with other students while being clear about my access needs. Especially in the beginning, there was a tug-of-war between being assertive and advocating for myself and fitting in. LOFT taught me the value of friendship and how it can transcend barriers in communication. Thanks to LOFT, I was able to be open about my needs without feeling singled out.

My hearing loss has undoubtedly guided me towards helping others. Through the experience of being deaf, I have been very fortunate to have been helped by so many people, which instilled in me a desire to return the favor by helping others. For example, I recently completed a summer internship with the Common Ground organization in New York City, which solves homelessness through building affordable and permanent housing. Whether I’m involved in politics, the arts, or nonprofit management, I hope to always help others in need.

I think it’s critical for teens with hearing loss to know that they’re not alone. There are many networks available that are full of people who are going through many of the same experiences you are. Whether you connect through AG Bell or through social networking, there are organizations and mediums that can and will support you.

LOFT is the co-creation of Donna Dickman, the late former executive director of AG Bell, and Ken Levinson, a longtime AG Bell member, former president of the AG Bell board and LOFT leader to this day.

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