

Part 1

Kat Penno

Hello Women in Hearing Health. I am delighted to be here today with Shari E and I'm your host today, Kat Penno. I know Shari through social media avenues. She's been in the limelight or on my radar for many years since I was a student. You ignite the fire in my belly to make this industry and profession better for everyone. I think you're an absolute superstar and I'm so grateful to have voices like yourself talking and pushing the status quo on what it means to live with hearing loss, and how to make it a more inclusive and accessible area for all. So, Shari, without further ado, would you like to give a little introduction about yourself and what it means to be a woman in hearing health.

Shari Eberts

Thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this Kat. I think it's such a wonderful initiative. There are so many women in hearing health and it's just wonderful to have that additional support network. Sometimes women have different challenges than men might have, so it's great to have this sounding board and this opportunity to just support each other. I think it's a wonderful community.

I got involved in hearing health I guess about 10-15 years ago but I first started noticing my hearing loss in my mid-20s and it was something that was very stigmatised. My father also had hearing loss and growing up I just watched him do anything possible to hide it. It was sort of an unmentionable topic in the family. He was always off at a far table whenever we were doing some sort of a family party and really isolated himself from the family, from his work, from his friends. So this was sort of when I learned about hearing loss. That it was something that was just so stigmatised and so secretive that it needed to be hidden. So when I first developed my own hearing loss, I did the exact same thing. I was embarrassed, I was ashamed. I would do anything to not have to admit that I couldn't hear.

But it all changed for me when I had my own children because my hearing loss is genetic, so I always worry that I may have passed it on to them. We don't know yet, they're still teenagers, but I saw them watching me do the same things that I had seen my father do. And I knew I was passing on the same stigma and cycle of embarrassment and I just didn't want to do it so I stopped and I started to accept my hearing loss finally and I sort of went in a 180-degree direction and decided to just put it out there and instead of trying to hide it, be very public about it and do everything that I could to break down the stigmas so if they ever have to cope with having hearing loss, the world would be a more open place, a more

accepting place. So, that's a bit of the inspiration behind my work to create a world where stigma goes down, and the technology options go up. People understand how to live well with hearing loss, and so if they ever need to do that, at least they have the stage set a little bit better.

Kat Penno

I'm a little bit teary, to be honest. I just think that's such an amazing story. I've read about your work before and I've heard you say it in another podcast, but to hear it I suppose face to face makes me feel like there's so much hope in the world and people are trying to make it a better place. The word that comes to my mind hearing your story there, is that you are such an incredible role model to many many people. Seeing your father go through his hearing health journey, what was your family unit like? Did you have a traditional family unit or raised by one parent? Did you have siblings? How did they all contribute to how you did your 180-degree flip because I can image that's no mean feat. Where did that drive, you mentioned becoming a parent which is huge, but before then could you feel the impotence in your belly or in your intuition going, 'I think I'm going to have to make this a better place'? And then you had the kids, and they were so to say the straw that broke the camel's back or the flame that ignited you.

Shari Eberts

My family unit was very traditional. My mum, my dad, my younger sister, and I. when I look back on it, we weren't a particular supportive family of my father. I think we could've done so much more to help him communicate better. I think it sort of came down to that stigma where he would never ask us for help. He never wanted to appear vulnerable or weak. This was many years ago when I think men had that expectation that they couldn't have any weakness or any vulnerability and so we didn't know necessarily when he needed help or how to help him. I think there was just a lot less information that was out there then. I remember that he would just be off sitting by himself, and one time I asked him 'why are you all the way over here' and he'd say 'if people want to talk to me they can come find me'. I think that was sort of his way of handling it.

I've been very lucky I have a very supportive family and a very supportive husband who I think knew my experience and knew that I was afraid that I would also have a family that wouldn't necessarily know how to support me and so we really tried to set it up in a different way and luckily, we've been successful with that. But I still had to sort of battle through

though right because it really had to come through me. I had to look at my kids and say this is not worth it. My own embarrassment and my own feelings, I have to put that second, I have to rise above that because I have to be that role model for my new family, my emerging family. It's not easy. It sounds great now everything's perfect but it's not perfect every day. I don't want anyone to think you just snap your fingers and then it's perfect. It takes work, but I'm very lucky that they all support me in my journey.

Kat Penno

I love that you've been that big role model and influence and the support has come. That's really awesome to hear, and important. From an industry perspective, I guess you're in this great position because you can talk from many stakeholder's points of view, as a woman in hearing health, who has hearing loss, who is a role model to many, and a voice to many. How has your journey been from that point of view?

Shari Eberts

Well my first career was in finance, so I guess I'm always used to being that woman in the room with lots of men and trying to get my voice heard. I do feel like in audiology at least in the United States, the make-up of the audiology community is very much skewed towards women. But I think women often have a harder time finding their voice and putting themselves out there. They may feel that imposter syndrome that women sometimes go through where they don't have the confidence in their skills, which is silly, but we also sort of suffer from that sometimes. And I think women sometimes, so better or for worse, seem to have a lot of competing demands on at times. A career is one thing that's very important but family is also very important. So it's sort of finding that balance.

So now as my kids are getting older, I know how this opportunity to be out there and focus on the work that I want to do in terms of pushing things forward professionally as well as for the hearing loss community in general. So I really like to partner with all different people of all different aspects of hearing health. I love to talk to the manufacturers and really try to present that patient perspective. I love to go to audiology conferences and again share that patient perspective because I think the more that we all interact with one another, we're all sort of on the same team, we maybe don't have the same understanding of each other as we could. So I think it's things like this, and interactions at different conferences across the industry that'll really help move things forward, so I love to be a part of that.

Kat Penno

It's a breath of fresh air to hear that you partner with so many different stakeholders in our industry because I feel that it can be quite siloed sometimes but I think as you say, these conversations will help broaden everyone's perspectives, and hopefully, encourage them or give them that confidence that you really can partner with who you believe is right for your client or for yourself, so I hope we can work towards breaking down some of those barriers.

Part 2

Kat Penno

Hello and welcome back to episode 2. You're listening to Shari Eberts and Kat Penno on the Women in Hearing Health podcast. Don't forget to loop back to episode one where Shari and I discuss a lot of interesting things, that we believe women in hearing health will be able to relate to. Thank you again for your time and attention. We hope you enjoy this podcast.

Kat Penno

Have you noticed that when you do talk to other stakeholders there have been any barriers? For example, I see that a lot of the senior leadership roles, or the board roles in our industry, are still predominantly male or seated by men. When I think about my experience with boards and leadership and accessibility programs is that we need every voice we can get and that it shouldn't be based on seniority necessarily, it should be based on diversity and inclusion. And so when you've gone to partner with certain stakeholders, have you ever felt, like you said in finance, I'm the only woman in this meeting, and it's not necessarily that I'm the female and there are nine men in here, but maybe the way you're heard is different.

Shari Eberts

I think that sometimes women struggle with that like it's almost that stereotypical meeting where the woman contributes an idea and everyone around the table is like okay, and then five minutes later the man explains the same exact idea but maybe in a more authoritative voice or more confident manner. It can be a little stereotypical but a little frustrating because I think we've all experienced that at some point in our lives or in some meetings, maybe many meetings. So I think this kind of community is great because we can sort of prop each

other up and try to give ourselves the courage to have that conviction and if somebody repeats your idea saying 'well I was just saying that five minutes ago, and here's actually an additional thought about that idea'. And so some of it is sort of up to us to rise to that challenge and to support one another in that challenge.

Kat Penno

Yeah I've certainly experienced that myself before and it's this very spotlighted moment where you feel like a deer in headlights when that happens. But I'm very good at trying to let it go and I think that may be more of a weakness than as you say, challenging for the better or the status that is accepted. I think I've got to remind myself that women in hearing health, it's not like I'm the first to talk about these. We might be the first to have this discussion on a podcast, but it's more that there are many other women in this field who have been trying to fight the good fight and I'm just coming along to further challenge that status and prove it for the next generation that comes through, or the current women like yourself and myself and then our children if they come into this profession. So, what does it mean to you Shari to be a role model in this industry?

Shari Eberts

Wow that's such a kind statement. I think that's wonderful to hear because that's sort of been my goal at least in my family to role model a more positive way of living with hearing loss and to ask for the assistance that we need and not be embarrassed about it. I feel like I've tried to be that role model in my family and just take it outwards. I think when I started my blog 'living with hearing loss' it was almost like therapy for myself and I didn't know who would be reading it. It was just an opportunity for me to share my emotions and share my feelings and almost give myself this pep talk like you got this. Like here's what you're worried about and here's what you can do.

Then over time it was just incredibly reinforcing that other people would read it and think oh my god that's my experience too, thank you for those ideas, I have another idea that maybe you could try this in that situation. So it became almost this ripple that just kept getting bigger and wider, and very organically. I realised that we can all learn from each other, and we all benefit from not feeling alone, in any of our struggles no matter what your struggle is. Whether it's hearing loss. Whether it's being a woman in an industry where you don't feel heard. Everything. Everyone has challenges but the more we can connect with one another and feel less alone, and share our tips and our tricks, the better off the whole community is.

And so it sort of was like, just like a learning experience for me too, that the more I put myself out there, the more people came back to me. The more I would give, the more I would get back. And it's just such a wonderful partnership and a chance to just meet other people in the world, all across the world. We're like 12 hours difference here, different days of the week that we all have similar goals. And I just love that it can start small and just these ripple effects can reach very far.

Kat Penno

I don't know if you realise how huge what you're doing is, because when I hear what you've just said, I think that's great. You were confident and vulnerable enough to share your experiences, not knowing what could happen. So you've put down your reflections in this blog, living with hearing loss, as you said, and then it's been reinforced by thousands of people globally and now it's had this ripple effect and I can only see it being bigger and better. I suppose if you reflect back on your time that you've been doing this for, you've probably started to see that you've given people the confidence and now they're doing similar things from the industry themselves, from hearing aid manufacturers, having all these blogs with people's voices, to other stakeholders or consumers like yourself coming up and sharing their stories. And I think that is so powerful. So when you reflect back on you doing this, do you get, I mean, I'm excited by that because I think the more people that can come to your blog and join your community and support each other and reinforce the message the better it is for everybody across the globe. It's huge that storytelling.

Shari Eberts

I agree with you and you know, and I'm not the only one that's doing it, right? I mean, there are so many wonderful bloggers and so many wonderful advocates within the hearing loss community. And one of my favourite things to do is to partner with them, to create content that can be shared. So during the pandemic, I worked with two other, women hearing loss advocates to create this documentary, we hear you that's actually touring around Australia, which is so cool. So, like with other hearing loss films, I think it's called unheard stories film festival. Sound Fair did such a good job putting that together. I think that was just one little idea and that's the perfect example of taking one idea, one film and creating a festival around it and really having that impact. So I love the idea of sort of partnering with other people and other advocates to create content that can hopefully create these other avenues for advocacy and awareness.

Then more recently with my book project, with Gail Hannon, is another tremendous blogger and advocate. We're really hoping that we've taken sort of all the knowledge that we've acquired from our own life experiences and also from all our interactions with other people with hearing loss over all the years of advocacy and tried to put out sort of this formula that will help other people live more skilfully and better with their hearing loss. So it's sort of like an exciting thing, I think also to partner, right? I mean, it's, it's like you can do it alone, but when you do it with others, I think it has even more impact.

Kat Penno

And if there's one message you could give to women in hearing health, the professionals, all stakeholders, consumers, and women who have children who are hearing loss. What would that be?

Shari Eberts

I would say, we got this. We are powerful. We are strong. We have empathy. We understand what it's like to be vulnerable. We understand our goals and we are really so well positioned to move the industry forward in a group way based on empathy, based on caring, based on good quality care that is not just about the technology. It's about the full gamut of the experience of living well with hearing loss and we've got it. We just have to support one another.

Kat Penno

I love that it is about the full gamut, looking at the person as a whole. I think it's also so powerful, the storytelling that you're doing and the partnerships that you're making, because I think you're absolutely right. That is exactly what will propel this industry into being more inclusive and accessible for the greater good. I love that so much. Thank you so much for your time today. And if you've got any questions for Shari or the Women in Hearing Health Group, you can contact Shari on all the social media platforms that LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and your blog and that's absolutely incredible that you and Gail Hannon have written a book. That's just amazing. And tell us the name of your book and where we can purchase that from.

Shari Eberts

So it's called 'Hear & Beyond. Live Skillfully with Hearing Loss.' and it's available worldwide electronically, so through Amazon or Barnes and Noble, and then it's also distributed through bookstores and libraries. I think it's coming to Australia.

Kat Penno

I prefer a hard copy myself. So that's cool that it's coming here soon. I look forward to having a copy and thank you so much for your time.

Women in Hearing Health: <https://www.womeninhearinghealth.com/>

Facebook community: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/442421886837175/>