

Volunteering With Hearing Loss

By Linda Bilodeau

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In February, a friend suggested that I run for an open seat on our Community's Homeowners Association Board. I thought her suggestion over. It would mean organizing a campaign, meeting new people, attending meet-and-greet sessions, and speaking with people on the phone. Such communications were challenging as I would be dealing with different voice volumes, male voices, female voices, people talking too fast, too loud, or not loud enough.

Since campaigning would mean putting myself in a stressful hearing situation, I sought advice from my husband and friends. All encouraged me to put aside my hearing fears and venture forward. I was told that my business and common sense skills were needed. All felt my hearing was in good enough shape and that I was as able as any hearing person to handle being a member of the Board of Directors.

I agreed to run. Campaigning during the pandemic proved easy as all candidates were told they had to run virtual campaigns. Gatherings at our Community Center were banded. Certainly, no one felt safe inviting a crowd to their homes. In order to run a campaign, I relied on social media. I learned the ins and outs of Zoom and Go-To-Meeting. My Made-for-iPhone hearing aids paired well with my iPad and allowed me to see faces and lip read. When in a virtual meeting, I heard perfectly, and I could answer questions about where I stood on issues in our community. I considered it a hearing victory when I won the election, receiving 58% of the vote.

Soon thereafter, I faced a second challenge. As anyone who has started a new job or volunteer position knows, there is a period of time when you have to learn the lingo. I found myself surrounded by people talking a HOA language that I didn't always understand. To educate myself, I read a lot, talked with the management staff, and asked questions on operational and legal aspects of our HOA and on the

deeper issues and concerns facing the community.

I also spent time talking with people in the community. I did not tell everyone about my hearing loss, but I did tell a select few. Since the pandemic prevented in-person meetings, I gave those wanting to talk with me the choice of email, a Zoom session, or a phone call. I prescheduled all phone calls and Zoom sessions, so that I would be seated in a quiet room with my hearing aids paired to my devices, ready to go.

Currently, our Board and most committees are still meeting remotely, using Go-To-Meeting or Zoom. In meetings, I sometimes get bogged down with fast-paced speech. When that happens, I ask the person speaking to slow down or repeat, reminding them I need to hear every word. Our Board meetings are recorded. I always re-listen to a meeting after the fact, to make sure that my notes are correct and that I understood everything.

The biggest challenge to any hearing situation is background noise. There have been instances in Zoom meetings which resulted in a struggle to hear over the roar of a lawnmower, a barking dog, or a telephone ringing. When that happens, I suggest people mute themselves and that eliminating background noise improves everyone's chance of hearing.

Becoming a board member has its challenges, but it also has its rewards. I know I am making a difference. Those who know about my hearing loss have been empathetic and helpful. Even though the struggle to hear is exhausting, I feel compelled to try. When you want to do something with your life, you should not let hearing loss stop you. The best way to meander through the hearing world is with the desire to accomplish your life's goals.