

# May is Speech and Hearing Awareness Month - Margaret MacPhail Story

By Jean Tingley

May is Speech and Hearing Awareness Month across Canada and for many Canadians, hearing loss whether great or small can have a profound affect on a person's life. For Margaret MacPhail of Meadow Bank, the onset of her hearing loss was a gradual one.

Having worked as a Medical Technologist for thirty-five years she was in mid-life before she realized the impact the hearing loss had in her communication exchange with others. "By this time I sensed the occurrence of prejudice in the form of audism," Margaret recalls. "Audism is loosely defined as discrimination against the hard of hearing and thought to be similar to racism. The lack of sensitivity with remarks such as 'turn up your hearing aid' or 'you can hear what you want to' and perhaps the most hurtful is the impatient "Oh, never mind" makes me very uncomfortable."

When someone in the family has a hearing loss, the whole family has a hearing problem and MacPhail was acutely aware that one of her five senses was impaired and was causing her emotional and grieving challenges. She had to admit to herself that the sadness and hurt feeling she was experiencing was because of the loss of her hearing. "There is no doubt that Colin, my late husband of 46 years, must have felt the same way as I did," she reflects. "He suffered the loss of the free and easy communication with his spouse."

During an appointment with the late Dr. Eric Green, he told Margaret she must be very tired at the end of the day straining to hear what others were saying to her. It was a moment she will never forget. "Finally, here was someone who had the empathy to understand what I was experiencing," said MacPhail. "For me, and for many hard of hearing individuals, empathy is more of an intellectual understanding of an individual's given condition than the deep sympathetic concern or feeling that compassion conveys."

With competent audiology testing it was confirmed MacPhail had irreversible hearing loss. Even though she was fitted with a hearing aid, she was still experiencing challenges at work. Loud noises from the time clocks required for sensitive tests, the on-going ripping of paper from the report forms and the structurally open laboratories work area presented difficulties in distinguishing words from other staff members.

Following the death of her husband, son Ian and daughter Ellen, encouraged Margaret to advocate for individuals with a different sense of hearing. Of particular interest was the access for communications in hospitals where she had experienced challenges as a staff member, as a patient and as a visitor at the closing of a life.

Since that time she has worked tirelessly to improve access at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for the hard of hearing. She worked closely with speech-language pathologist Rick Burger at the QEH and in 2005 the QEH Hearing Access Program Committee was formed creating a policy for accessibility for the deaf and hard of hearing at the hospital.

In November, 2009, MacPhail was recognized for her efforts with the Award of Merit from the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association.