

Self-empowerment begins with asking questions

As I gave my presentation during a recent Town Hall Meeting in Paducah, the words flowed from my mind to my hands in a stream of consciousness. After 17 years with the Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, I knew the mandates and what we do for the community, and I can speak about these things on command.

I paused for a moment in my remarks to go to the next slide when my eyes caught an individual who looked surprised, bewildered and excited all at the same time. She was hanging on every word, taking notes on everything I said. She asked a few questions during the presentation, but mostly she scratched away at a notepad with the diligence of a court stenographer.

After the presentation, this woman approached me. She was hard of hearing — late-deafened — and it had turned her world upside down. She had lost her job because of her hearing loss and, perhaps even more dire, she felt she had lost her day-to-day independence. She told me she felt doors were being closed and that there were no avenues to communication.

She had all those anxious feelings because she didn't know there was another way. She didn't know her options. For example, when she found out that we can provide telephone equipment and wireless plans specially tailored for deaf and hard of hearing consumers, she was ecstatic. When she received guidance (for the first time) on how to work her hearing aid, she was amazed.

Written by
*Virginia L.
Moore*
KCDHH
Executive
Director

It's moments like these that crystalized, for me, why we do what we do. Very often, they are the beginning of imparting a sense of independence and wisdom in people who don't know where to start looking for it. I finished the presentation knowing what KCDHH had to offer this person, and how it would make a huge impact on this one individual. We helped open a new door for her, just when she thought all the doors to communication had been closed.

Not only was the agency able to provide information and insight to new technology, we were able to provide her with connections to local people to help her on the road to self-advocacy. A commission board member who lives in the area will provide ongoing support for some of the concerns this individual has. Helping individuals such as this plug into a network of local resources is what KCDHH is meant to be doing to empower the community we serve.

Yes...we make a difference. It is rejuvenating because when we make a difference, we renew the excitement in ourselves, as the human element of the commission, by sharing information, anything from the communication visor card, to educating parents on their children's rights, to making systematic changes within the First Steps program. We handle requests on a daily basis and at times we don't directly see the impact of our work. Some requests have a quick resolution and some are very complex and can take a week or longer. A consumer might ask, "Is it true that movie theaters do not have to provide captioning device?"; "Do I have the right to

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Becky Bush

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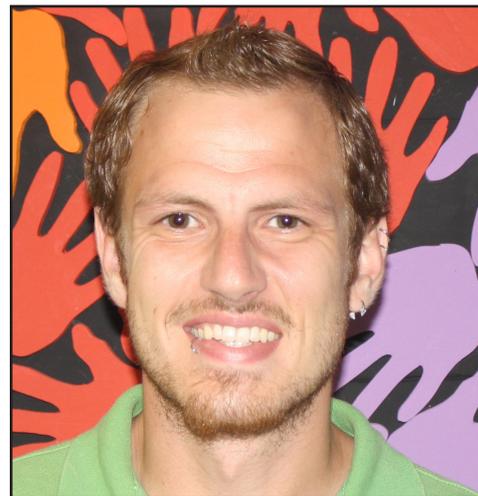
President of Kentucky Association of
the Deaf

Blake Noland joins KCDHH staff

Louisville native Blake Noland joined the Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing staff in July as Executive Secretary II.

Noland graduated Gallaudet University in 2011 with bachelor's degree in communication studies. He began at KCDHH this summer as an intern and said he is "very excited to be able to work with this awesome team. I look forward to serving all Deaf and Hard of Hearing Kentuckians."

Noland's duties include assisting with day-to-day operations in the agency office, helping with preparations and logistics for



commission meetings and working closely with the Executive Director.

You are your greatest advocate

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an interpreter?" to the statement "My child is not autistic, just deaf. What do I do now?" Each question is as unique as the person asking it.

As KCDHH staff, each of us follows the agency's Mission Statement and Mandates and every day we strive to make a difference, and we do that in a variety of ways. We provide empowering information. We work with the commission board to establish a network of people to assist with the empowerment. We advocate for the deaf and hard of hearing population as a whole.

However, the true "difference" is made when the individuals we are assisting **ACT** on that information. **The "difference" is YOU!** That difference starts when a deaf or hard of hearing person steps out of the comfort of their home to attend a Town Hall meeting, asks questions, and then, armed with the answers, ventures out even further as a powerful self-advocate.

I think on that early fall day in Paducah, at McCracken County Public Library, we gave someone the tools to improve their condition. Armed with that knowledge, I think the population we serve will become a shining example of self-empowerment, the kind of people that someone who is perhaps timid about their hearing loss can one day go to and say, "I need help. Where do I start?"

KCDHH is here for you, so please reach out to us, so we can throw you a lifeline of knowledge and resources that will enable you to conquer what once seemed like an insurmountable barrier. Together, we do make a difference.

KCDHH marks its 30th anniversary

This year, the Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing celebrated its 30th anniversary as a state agency. The commission was formed by the General Assembly in 1982 under then-Governor John Y. Brown Jr. The original 11-member commission has grown to 14 members in its present form.

Over the past three decades, KCDHH has been led by four executive directors. One of the former executive directors, Dr. Bobbie Beth Scoggins, shared her thoughts with us about her tenure and the future of the agency.

Dr. Scoggins is most recently retired, having served as president of the National Association of the Deaf from 2006-2012. She was executive director of KCDHH from 1993-2007, succeeding Bill Rogers,

who was KCDHH's first ever executive director.



Dr. Bobbie Beth Scoggins

Q: What do you feel was the agency's most important accomplishment in your tenure?

A: Coming to Kentucky in 1993 proved to be a turning point for KCDHH and myself, KCDHH started as a small office becoming a very functional workplace in a deaf-centric environment, eye friendly for folks who are deaf and hard of hearing. It is difficult to single out one most important accomplishment because there were multi-faceted strategies in getting the quality of governmental



This photo was taken in 1982 to commemorate the establishment of the Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. From left, Terry Hostin, Jan Garrett, former Gov. John Y. Brown Jr., former KCDHH Executive Director Bill Rogers — the agency's first executive director — and Ann Rogers.

services up to par for deaf and hard of hearing Kentuckians. The first step was to create a Task Force Study called, "Strategic and Long Range Plan." This study was to provide benchmarks of deaf and hard of hearing services, either in place or to be fully implemented. From there, we were able to measure outcomes of such services in Kentucky. If I have to choose my favorite one, it was DeaFestival-Kentucky, the rest is history. Two other accomplishments were the Telecommunications Access Program and Kentucky licensure for sign language interpreters.

Q: Has the agency's role changed since its founding in 1982? If so, how do you feel it has changed?

A: The mandates have not changed much since 1982, the challenge is to

ensure that the agency remains viable and highly visible for 650,000 deaf and hard of hearing Kentuckians. We have been able to achieve this kind of visibility for the agency through sheer dedication, commitment and countless hours of labor of love for the work we did and still do.

Q: What do you miss about the agency?

A: The constant synergy of doing the work we believe in; the outstanding team I have had in each staff member giving it all out to the people of Kentucky. They are truly heroes!

Q: How did your experiences with KCDHH help you after you left the agency?

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My choice

*A narrative by KCDHH Information Program Coordinator
Opeoluwa Sotonwa*

The fact that I have decided to write about this is an indication that I've come a long way in accepting the reality of who I am. Looking back, I was a 16-year-old lad, an upcoming musician with a unique mastery of the "Ewi" genre, and was fluent in seven languages. My world fell apart on Oct. 16, 1994, when I contracted meningitis. It was just a couple of seconds before I was transported into the world of silence. This sudden transformation is documented in my book "Journey to the Silent World."

Fast forward to last fall, when I began reading and pondering the arguments for and against Cochlear Implants. I also took the time to mingle with pro- and anti-CI individuals at different public forums. I wrestled with the notion that pandering to the pro-CI philosophy is a confirmation of certain medical defects in me that ought to be fixed. I have also gone through the dilemma of being unpleasantly recruited into the anti-CI fold, whose members believe hearing loss is a cultural way of life and feel threatened by medical attempts to eradicate deafness.

Still struggling with my identity, I have shifted the goal post several times and conveniently painted myself as a hybrid of Deaf with capital "D" and deaf with a small "d." This was a marriage of convenience, with the sole aim of finding myself a soft spot to mingle and socialize. I'm a Sign Exact English kind of guy, who happens to be married to a thoroughbred Gallaudetian, steeped in American Sign Language (ASL).

I continue to ask myself if I'm comfortable with the picture I have painted about my identity. Working at the Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing has given me comfort as I do not have to wrestle with communication issues. At KCDHH, almost everyone has a close connection to ASL and deaf culture. It is like working with a bunch of family members with ASL in common.

My wife became pregnant a month after our wedding. I began to give serious thought to the idea of raising our kids as deaf couple, but the idea of being able to hear the cry and laughter of our baby seemed more appealing. It was at this time that I made efforts to see a surgeon and audiologist at the University of Kentucky. I had to talk to my wife about my decision, even though she strongly believes in Deaf emancipation and philosophy as touted by the Deaf community, she was very understanding and supportive.



Opeoluwa Sotonwa is one of KCDHH's Information Program Coordinators. This summer, he underwent Cochlear Implant surgery, and documented his journey along that path for this issue of the Communicator.

On a very bright Tuesday morning, Dec. 6, 2011, I walked into the University of Kentucky Clinic to see an audiologist, who would determine if I met the candidacy requirement for Cochlear Implant surgery. The most poignant query concerned my immersion in deaf culture: I'm married to a Deaf woman and I work in a predominantly ASL friendly office. Would I be comfortable with the Deaf community's potential resentment of me as a CI user? My answer was that I have never for a day lived my life according to the philosophies of others. If there is a battle I have fought and won, it is due to my ability to assert my will and insert it in my plans while creating a roadmap for the execution of those plans.

Many people in the deaf community are slowly embracing CI technology, as they accept the reality that CI does not cure deafness and it does not change the identity or orientation of those who choose to embrace it. The conflict between the two opposing camps is being fueled by half-truths and misinformation, which are becoming glaring by the day. I grew up speaking seven languages and I love music. I'm not just going to give up all that goodness if I have the means to regain it just because I'm afraid some people are going to disapprove. It is always in human nature to agree to disagree and disagree to agree, but our lives will continue in whatever direction we choose to go.

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My CI journey revealed

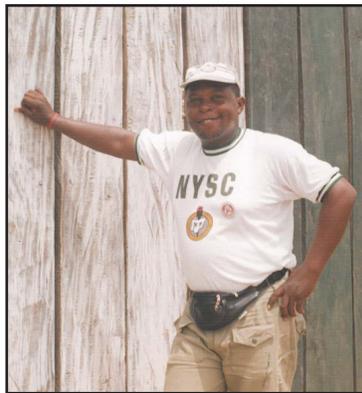
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The audiologist conducted several tests, most of which I have done multiple times. I knew my hearing loss was very profound. No hearing aid in the world was going to functionally help me even though I have two pairs, which I've come to embrace as "my Deafie Ornaments" because they more or less magnified my identity as a deaf person. Once people spot it on me, they instantly know that I have some form of hearing loss.

Three weeks after I had seen the audiologist and surgeon at UK, I received shocking news in the mail. My cochlea was fully ossified. Surgery would not be possible in my situation because there was no place to create a bed for the implant to stay.

I was dejected; it was like a death sentence that I would never be able to hear again in life. Despite the setback, I was undeterred in seeking a second opinion. I started researching about successful surgeries that had happened in spite of cochlear ossification. I was stunned by the success rates, which were well-documented, as well as the different procedures employed to achieve success. This gave me newfound confidence and led me to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn.

At Vandy, it only took two visits before my surgery was scheduled and within the span of a month, I had surgery on my right ear. Yet again, another huge disappointment. The surgeon couldn't find enough space to insert the implant. After my recovery, I gave up until the surgeon contacted me and told me of new technology, which he believed would work for me.



At this stage, I had nothing to lose. So, I figured, let's just do it.

On the day of the surgery, I was calm and upbeat. I concluded that even if the surgery failed, I knew I had done everything possible. The surgery lasted five hours. When I woke up, I was told the implant was in me. I exclaimed, "So, the tiny ear gadget finally find a home in me?"

I'm reminded of the words of Orison Swett Marden: "Success is not measured by what you accomplish but by the opposition you have encountered, and the courage with which you have maintained the struggle against overwhelming odds."

In the nearly two months since I started writing this article, I have had four mapping sessions and each time, my hearing has improved considerably. I should point out that what I hear with CI is not the same as what I heard with my natural ear. In fact, this is technically a new language, which must be relearned. Right now, I can hear virtually anything but my ability to decode what I'm hearing is still at a tender stage. I do not have the time or resources for self-rehabilitation.

Still, it has been an eye-opening experience. I would like to share with you a funny story about my first CI hearing without visualization. When I was growing up as a hearing lad in Africa, we did not have the luxury of running water and fancy toilets. We instead used latrines, so I had no idea that whenever we flush a toilet, the running water that filled up the toilet tank makes noise. A few days, after my second CI mapping, I was intrigued to hear noises whose origin I did not know. It took me a few seconds before the realization dawned on me that water is running to fill the toilet bowl that I just emptied into the sewage. Of course! It does feel good to hear again.

Q&A with Dr. Scoggins

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A: My 14 years with KCDHH has taught me invaluable experiences of what it means to be a leader on a national level for the American Deaf Community. Dealing with diverse views and channeling those views into a national agenda to battle with social injustice and discrimination in our communities.

Q: What do you hope to see the agency accomplish in the future?

A: I truly hope that the agency could continue to raise the benchmarks of deaf and hard of hearing services. In light of economic downturn, it takes KCDHH team to be creative to hold on to current level of services and not compromise consumers' communication needs.



KCDHH

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KCDHH
Holiday Open House
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Come join us
for refreshments and fun!



Come help us
celebrate 30 years of
success!

KCDHH will celebrate
its 30th Anniversary
this spring.

Date & time to be
announced soon!