



Valley & State

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Diary details one journey among many heroes

Laurie Roberts



Tuesday, October 24, 1944 Aboard the SS Mecklenburg

Time 0:00: As I write this, in the distance through the fog and rain of the channel is France. I wonder how many of us will live to see France fade into the distance as we return to the U.S. We are about a mile out and due to the rough sea, are forced to wait until tomorrow to disembark. There are ships as far as the eye can see waiting for the same thing...

I reread the passage above a few days ago, on Veterans Day, wondering what it was like on that long ago day for a 19-year-old kid from Mississippi, waiting to

disembark into a world war. Of course, the way had already been paved for him, with the blood of brave men who died four months earlier on a beach named Omaha.

Thursday, October 26, 1944 SS Melkinburg - LST - Omaha Beach

The first sight to greet us was a large American cemetery with crosses — row on row — as far as the eye could see. We walked through the ruins of several villages to our bivouac area.

His diary is full of the stuff of 19-year-olds: sports scores and army buddies and food. But then there is other stuff, the

sites and the sounds of war and the mud, lots and lots of mud as he makes his way through France and Belgium and the Netherlands.

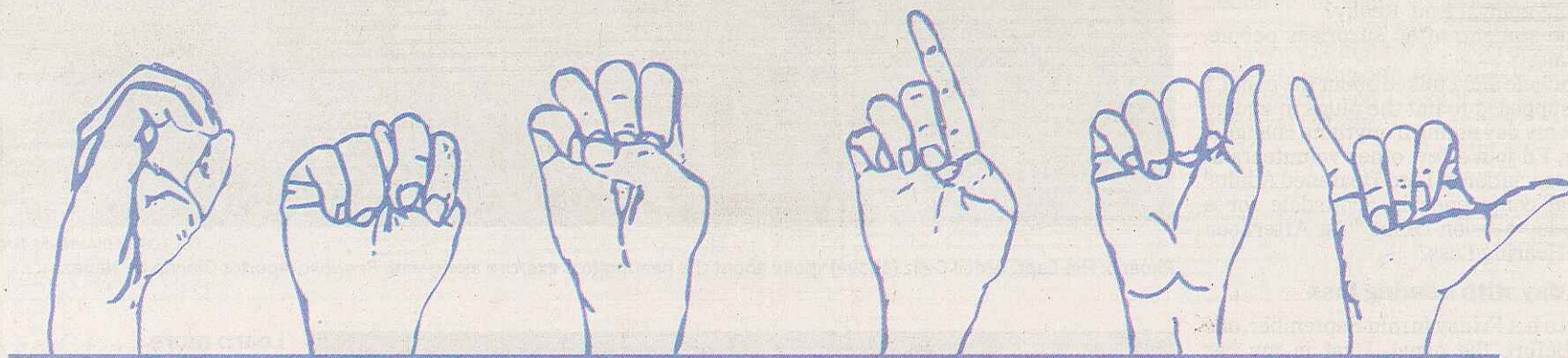
Saturday, October 28, 1944 SNCF R.R. (40 hommes et chavin)

We saw many ruined towns and villages along the way. We traveled from Caen to Signey (famous during the first few days of the invasion), then to St. Lo where the great break-through that won for us France occurred. Then on Avranches and Dol-de-Bretagne, and Reenes, then Laval and finally our camp near Le Mans. St. Lo was, of course, com-

pletely ruined. Not a building left standing. Along the way we saw a lot of ruined German and French railway cars. Also a lot of prisoners, too. The enemy supermen looked plenty tired and scared. Not at all like the PWs we see in the States.

And finally, into Germany:

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ONE DAY

without my hearing taught me more than I thought it would

DIANNA M. NÁÑEZ THE REPUBLIC · AZCENTRAL.COM

I didn't hear the black sedan until it swooshed past me on the freeway.

The speeding driver cut into my lane. I froze for a second. Then, I slowed down. When another car swooshed past me, I realized I might not be able to stomach not hearing while driving.

I'm already a nervous driver. When I was little, my mom was so scared of driving she set mom-is-behind-the-wheel rules. I wasn't allowed to speak or have the radio on. We sat in silence while she braved the road.

My Friday work commute was going to be a throwback to my driving-with-mom days. I had lost much of my hearing, and I was committed to staying that way — for the day.

I wasn't actually losing my hearing. I was wearing earmolds that blocked much of the sound around me, and it was my choice.

In August, I had volunteered with the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing.

The commission was sponsoring a panel to give people who can hear insight into what life is like for people who have hearing loss. I figured if I was going to do this right, I had to stick to my routine. That meant navigating the freeway without ripping my ear plugs out.

And driving wasn't even my biggest worry. I'd face that when I got to work. As a reporter, my job is to listen to people. Hear their stories. Talk with them about their life. But how can I understand their words? Their joys. Their sadness. How can I write their stories if I can't hear them?

Something else was also bothering me: What could just one day with a slight hearing loss teach me about what it's like to live every day without one of my five senses?

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"Even a small taste of losing what we take for granted can sometimes change how we see, hear and treat others."

DIANNA M. NÁÑEZ
REPUBLIC REPORTER

From the Cover

HEARING LOSS TAUGHT ME A LOT

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Fancy sound-blocking earmolds

In early September, I met Michele Michaels. She was at Dr. Debra Venkatesh's Tempe office, where I got fitted for fancy-sounding "custom-made sound-blocking earmolds."

The ear plugs were supposed to simulate what it would be like for someone with hearing to deal with a mild hearing loss, she said. (If you're curious, technically, there's a noise-reduction rating of 27-29 decibels. Given that regular human conversation is somewhere in the 60 decibel range, that's a real loss.)

Michele is a specialist in hard-of-hearing issues with the state commission. She told me that she's been hard of hearing for decades.

She travels the state teaching people about resources and support for those who face hearing loss.

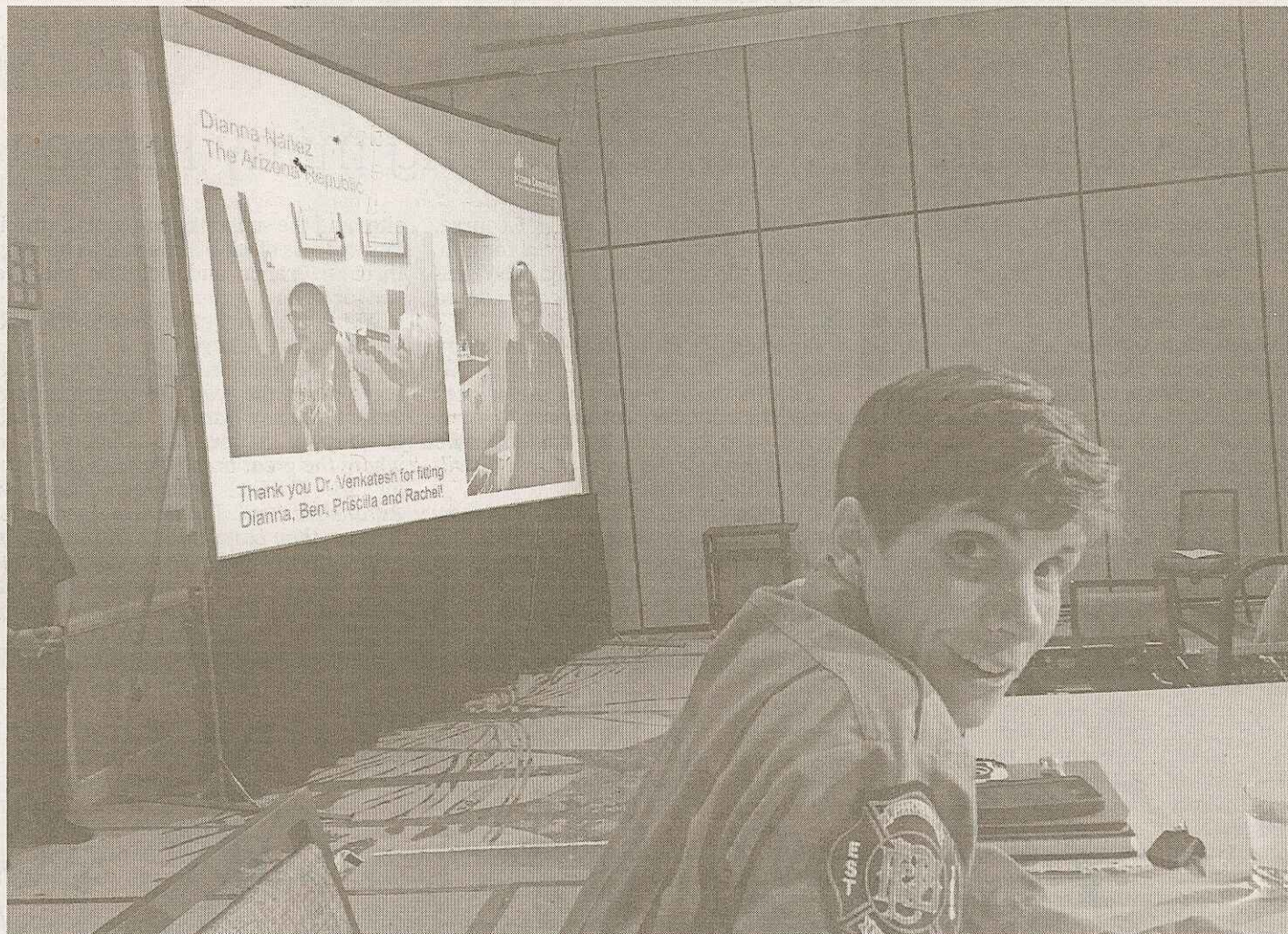
"Can't hear much without this," she said, smiling and pointing at her hearing aid.

"About 700,000 people in the state of Arizona are hearing impaired," she said.

That many, I said. Really?

The statistic often surprises people, she said.

Michele and I talked about the panel. I was supposed to put the plugs in and go about my day noting if anything changed. Later, I'd join a few other volunteers at the Association of Late-Deafened Adults' annual conference in Scottsdale for a Saturday session called "An Afternoon with Hearing Loss."



PHOTOS BY DIANNA M. NÁJUEZ/THE REPUBLIC

Phoenix Fire Capt. Ardel Deliz (above) spoke about the hearing-loss exercise along with *Republic* reporter Dianna M. Nájuez.

One day with hearing loss

On a hot Friday in mid-September, one day before the panel, I sat in my car sweating and double-checking whether I had my chunky purple ear plugs in correctly. (I was given a choice of color/style for my earmolds. Obviously, I went for purple with sparkly glitter.)

Freeways in Phoenix are terrifying enough as it is. I almost pulled out the plugs when I realized the sound of the road and cars whizzing by were muffled. Instead, I paid extra close attention. Silenced the radio. And forced myself not to touch my cellphone.

I don't think I've ever been more happy to pull into the parking garage at work.

Newsroom chitchat is at its best on Fridays. My cubicle neighbor, Richard, makes some of his best bad jokes. (There's a reason why there's a Twitter hashtag — #OH — for silly stuff "overheard" in the newsroom.)

It only took a few minutes before I realized I couldn't clearly hear Richard's bad jokes or anyone else without turning my ear toward their mouth and inching embarrassingly close to the sound of their voice. I looked kind of like that dog from the old RCA ads.

And I was pretty sure that when I spoke the sound coming out of my mouth was echoing across the room at not-suitable-for-work levels. Rather than keep asking people to speak up, I gave up on joining their conversations.

After about two hours of self-imposed solitude, I realized something. Being hard of hearing isn't just a physical loss that silences one of your senses. It can take a toll on how you feel and act.

It can also change how others treat you.

When I ran into my editor in the hall, I told him I couldn't hear well because it was my "afternoon with hearing loss" day.

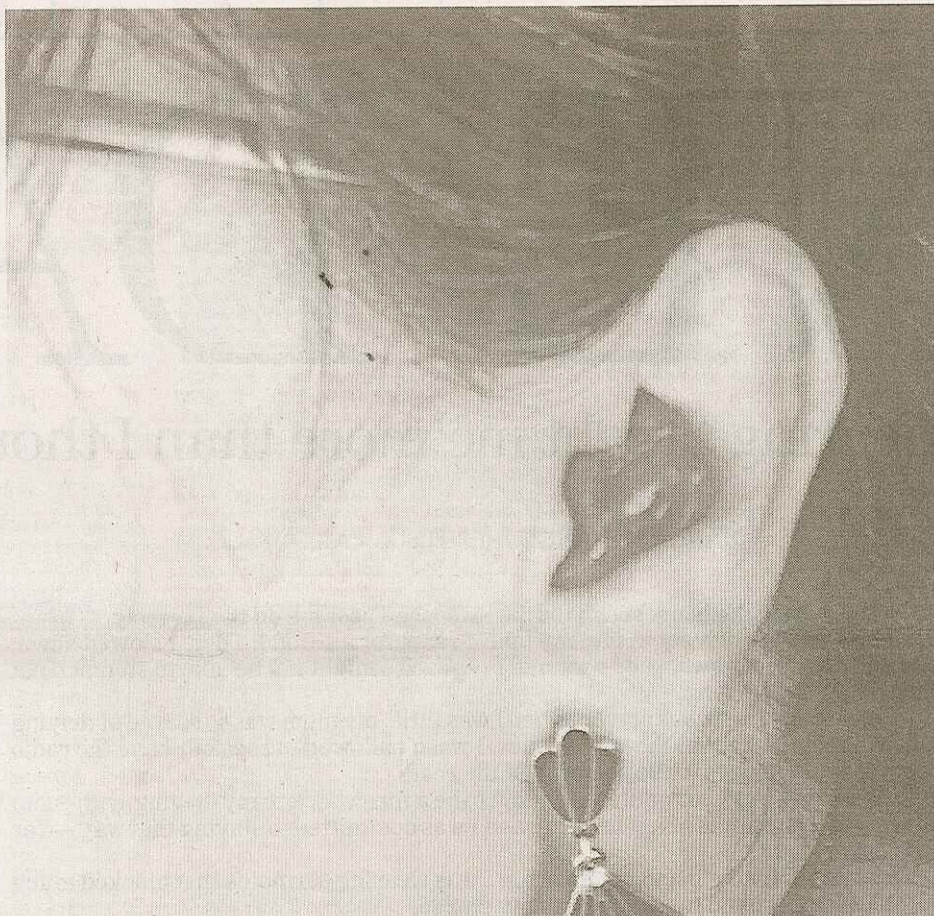
The first thing he did was start mouthing words at me, a joking test to see if I had really lost my hearing.

"Don't," I said. "I'm already freaking out that I can't hear right."

He chuckled and stopped. We chatted briefly. I really just wanted to escape. I couldn't gauge the volume of my own voice and I was nervous I might be half yelling at my boss.

I readied for an interview by phone. (I could've set up TTY, which is basically texting by telephone, but phone interviews are already a second best to in-person interviews so I wanted to at least try listening to and talking with the person on the other end.)

I politely explained to the woman I was interviewing why I couldn't hear well. I asked her to please speak up. She did, for the first minute or so. Then, she forgot. I started missing some of her words. I was completely missing the nuances in her voice. Those nuances tell me



Náñez wore glittery purple earmolds to limit her hearing.

how a person is feeling. They're the rhythm to a conversation that let me know when I can ask someone to tell me more or when I need to give them space.

I felt bad asking her to speak up again, so I did my best. I smashed the phone hard against my ear until it hurt. I asked her to repeat her words. I tried not to raise my voice when I asked her questions.

This was no way to make someone comfortable so they could share their story.

I felt bad that I was relieved when the conversation ended. I was also relieved I didn't have any more interviews scheduled that day.

I turned to writing. Even that was different. When I write, I listen to music. It's a device I use for blocking out distractions. Certain songs inspire me. I keep the volume low so I can still hear the words in my head.

Without music, I struggled to focus. The words and my writing were slow to come.

By 4:30 p.m., I'd had the earmolds in for about seven hours. I really wanted my hearing back.

I pulled the plugs out.

The first thing I noticed was how loud everything, especially the air-condition-

er, sounded. I put my ear buds in, listened to my favorite songs and started writing. That felt really good.

I was getting ready to leave when my editor stopped by my desk. I told him I could hear him. I wasn't wearing the plugs anymore.

He told me he felt bad that he'd cracked a joke earlier about my hearing-loss experience. It's OK, I said, another person had made that same joke. Still, he said, he wouldn't have made light of someone's real disability. And for this day, that was exactly the experience I was trying to have.

We chatted about those moments when you realize you lack an understanding for what others are going through.

It was a little bit like the way I felt when I pulled out my earplugs. I thought of people with hearing loss who can't just turn the sound back on.

Things we take for granted

At the panel the next day, I joined a Phoenix firefighter, a local radio personality and a public-relations specialist. (Speaking of "overheard in the newsroom," there's probably a great joke in there somewhere about what happens when a reporter, a firefighter, a DJ and a PR person walk into a bar. Fortunately,

Learn more

» Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing: acdhh.org

» Association of Late-Deafened Adults: al-da.org

we were just in a conference room.)

We each talked about how our experience changed our perspectives and we answered audience questions. A sign language interpreter stood nearby translating our words.

When it was my turn, I admitted my fears. I said I'd wondered how I'd do my job. And I worried that one day with limited hearing could never show me what it's like to live every day with hearing loss.

I explained how scared I was when I couldn't fully hear cars until the drivers sped past me on the freeway.

How I stopped talking with my coworkers because I couldn't clearly hear their voices. How even after I asked people to please speak up, they'd forget. And how my life and my work would change if I couldn't hear people speak.

Most people think of hearing loss as a physical loss, I said, but it can be a social, emotional, and sometimes a professional loss, too.

One woman fought back tears when she stood for a question. She said she wanted me to know the pain of not being able to hear the sound of her own voice.

A man told me it's not just peers you isolate yourself from. He said his hearing loss had made it hard for him to socialize with his own brothers. Another man asked Phoenix firefighter Capt. Ardel Deliz, can people with hearing loss serve as firefighters?

She folded her hands. Her eyes looked sad when she said no. Firefighters need to hear the crackles of a blaze, she said. They need to pinpoint a call for help in a burning building, she said.

Angie Luigina Fuoco waited until after the panel to chat with me. She said she appreciated that we were trying to understand their world. She wanted me to know something.

It's not all bad, she said. Sometimes there's peace in silencing the loud world, she said.

We hugged.

I told Angie I'd realized something.

Even a small taste of losing what we take for granted can sometimes change how we see, hear and treat others.

Dianna M. Náñez writes about stories in Arizona and the rest of the world that make us believe in humanity, faith, hope and love. Drop her a line about your community's superheroes. You know the ones — kind, resilient, empathetic people making small miracles happen.
Follow her on Twitter: [@diannananez](https://twitter.com/diannananez).