

By Barbara Liss Chertok



At HCAA's 30th Birthday Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, this June, Vinton Cerf, vice president and chief Internet evangelist for Google, will deliver the keynote address at the opening session.

In a pre-convention statement, Dr. Cerf said: "I will talk about technology and hearing assistance including the role of mobile, Internet-enabled devices. The Internet is becoming a pervasive infrastructure and it can be put to good use assisting people with hearing loss to function in the hearing world more effectively."

Vinton "Vint" G. Cerf, Ph.D., 66, was born in New Haven, Connecticut, and grew up in Los Angeles. A six-week premature delivery caused his long term sensorineural hearing loss. He holds a bachelor of science degree in mathematics from Stanford University and master of science and Ph.D. degrees from UCLA.

Widely known as one of the "Fathers of the Internet," his contributions have been recognized repeatedly with honorary degrees and awards that include the National Medal of Technology, the Turing Award and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Dr. Cerf is the co-designer with Robert E. Kahn of the TCP/IP protocols and the basic architecture of the Internet. They met at UCLA in the 1970s.

In the 1980s, as vice president of MCI Digital Information Service, Dr. Cerf led the engineering of MCI Mail, the first commercial e-mail service to be connected to the Internet.

In 1997, they were presented with the National Medal of Technology by President Bill Clinton, "for creating and sustaining development of Internet Protocols and continuing to provide leadership in the emerging industry of Internetworking."

In 2005, they were awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor bestowed in the U.S., by President George W. Bush for their contributions to the creation of the Internet and were inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame in 2006.

Dr. Cerf is working on the Interplanetary Internet together with NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. It will be a new standard to communicate from planet to planet, using radio/laser communications that are highly tolerant to signal degradation.

He currently serves on the board of advisors of Scientists and Engineers for America, an organization focused on promoting sound science in American government.

Dr. Cerf is writing several books at once, with only one about the Internet. "I hesitate to say the definitive history, but I will try very hard to characterize the first ten years of it." Cerf adds he may extend the project to cover the first twenty years, before the Internet started to become mainstream in the 1990s.

Dr. Cerf has worked for Google in Herndon, Virginia, since 2005. He has become well known for his predictions on how technology will affect future society, encompassing such areas as artificial intelligence, environmentalism, the advent of Internet Protocol version 6 (IPv6) and the transformation of the television industry and its delivery model.

Sigrid T. Cerf, 66, was born in Kansas and heard naturally until the age of three when spinal meningitis plunged her into a silent world. She grew up outside the deaf community speaking English and reading lips. The powerful body hearing aid she wore provided her with little hearing, yet she was mainstreamed in public schools, and went on to earn a bachelor of arts degree in art and architectural illustrating from Kansas State University.

As a person who had some memory of sound, Sigrid was considered a

prime candidate for a cochlear implant. Fifty years later, the miracle of a cochlear implant propelled her back into the world of sound, followed by a second implant in the other ear ten years later.

Upon receiving her first implant, Sigrid said: "It was nothing but fun. After being deaf for 50 years, it was the easiest adjustment I've ever had to make." Sigrid has listened to over 500! audio books on a Walkman which has resulted in her ability to function more efficiently as a hearing person in the mainstream. In spite of her early childhood history of profound deafness so soon after acquiring language, Sigrid possesses remarkable listening, verbal and speech skills.

Dr. Cerf is the co-designer with Robert E. Kahn of the TCP/IP protocols and the basic architecture of the Internet. They met at UCLA in the 1970s. In 2005, they received the highest civilian honor bestowed in the U.S., the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The roughly 4,000 American children born deaf each year are also good candidates for cochlear implants if they are caught early in development, when their brains are still malleable enough to learn how to convert sound into meaningful language.

"The window of opportunity is wide open at the beginning of life," Dr. John A. Niparko, Sigrid's surgeon, says, "but generally closed for good by age 12 or 14." Within a few years, Niparko hopes to see the advent of implants that need no external computer or wiring. In the end, he pre-



In Sigrid's words: Illustrator Sigrid and computer geek Vint, working from home in the late 60s

dicts, cochlear implants will diminish the need for sign language and special schools.

The Cerfs live in Virginia and have two sons. A son in San Francisco works for Apple and the other lives in Hollywood and is a cameraman. The Cerfs are active with charitable, educational, and professional organizations.

Interview with Vinton G. Cerf

Barbara Chertok: Your title at Google is Vice President and Chief Internet Evangelist. Why 'evangelist'?

Vint Cerf: For many years, I have been an advocate of the widespread implementation and use of the Internet. Only about 1.5 billion people are online so there are five billion to go. Of course, having more people on the Internet is also good for Google, so that's part of the rationale for the unusual title.

Google is so widely recognized, its name has become a verb. Why?

Vint Cerf: The Niagara of information that has flowed onto the World Wide Web since Tim Berners-Lee

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Internet Man, Renaissance Woman

An Interview with Vinton and Sigrid Cerf

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implemented it in 1989 has been astonishing. People really want to share their information with the world. But there is so much information that it is hard to find what you are looking for on the Net.

So companies like AltaVista, Yahoo!, Google and others have arisen to help Internauts find the information they are looking for. Google's search engine seems to be particularly able to provide relevant pointers to useful information and has become one of the most popular of the search services.

The Internet started to become mainstream in the 1990s. How would you characterize it today?

Vint Cerf: It is a vibrant and growing part of the online lives of over 1.5 billion people around the world. Amazingly, there are nearly 800 million users in Asia. China has more users than North America (about 250 million). Europe has nearly 400 million users. It is also a reflection of the interests of the general public, but that also includes criminal and disruptive elements so we find cybercrime in the middle of this otherwise constructive medium.

Because so much of the communication on the Internet is in written form, by preference, people with hearing loss are often placed on completely equal status with those of normal hearing.

Privacy and security are two very precious commodities that are under attack in this online world. As a consequence, legislators and law enforcement officials feel pressure to take action to protect societies' members from harm. Technologists look for ways to improve the properties of the Internet while preserving its openness as much as possible. This attribute has led to the flowering of an endless cornucopia of applications and ideas. The Internet is one of the most democratic instruments of expression in history. Balancing open access and open opportunity to offer information while preserving safety and security will be the major challenge for this next decade.



Sigrid and Vint mingle with a guest at the First Amendment Awards dinner of the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation.

As co-founder of the Internet, what about your invention gives you the most satisfaction?

Vint Cerf: It is most satisfying to see the widespread adoption and use of the technology in a global collaboration of such magnitude. The open platform has invited an endless array of new products and services and there seems to be no end in sight. It is rare to see an infrastructure that invites the kind of information sharing that the WWW application has triggered. For many people, it has also become a great leveler. Because so much of the communication on the Internet is in written form, by preference, people with hearing loss are often placed on completely equal status with those of normal hearing.

You are widely known as one of the 'Fathers of the Internet.' With whom did you collaborate?

Vint Cerf: Bob Kahn started the Internetting program at the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency in late 1972 and then asked me to join him in the exploration of the idea of standardizing ways to interconnect computer networks. We began this work together in the spring of 1973 and within about six months we had a basic design which we briefed to

colleagues in the International Network Working Group at a meeting at the University of Sussex in England.

We then wrote a formal paper that was published in May, 1974. Bob and I worked, among many others, on the ARPANET which was the first large-area demonstration of packet switching technology. There is a score of people who were instrumental in that experiment and, indeed, were it not for its success, Bob and I would not have met and subsequently worked on the Internet idea.

As the saying goes: 'Necessity is the mother of invention.' Was your hearing loss a motivating factor in co-founding the Internet?

Vint Cerf: At the time there were networks of computers but they were proprietary. IBM has its Systems Network Architecture; Digital Equipment Corporation had DECNET; Hewlett-Packard had its Distributed System. These proprietary networks did not interwork. Bob and I thought that the U.S. Defense Department should have a non-proprietary and standard way to interconnect any collection of packet-switched networks so we concluded to design the Internet in such a way that its architecture could be globally standardized and implemented by anyone

interested in computer networking. It was intended to be a highly collaborative system and fully distributed so that there would be no central points of failure. Plainly, we succeeded in this endeavor, but luck, timing and the willingness of many colleagues to contribute to the work played important roles.

In 2005 you were awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom—the highest award a civilian can receive in the United States—and a year later, inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame. What was that like?

Vint Cerf: It was utterly fascinating. The Hall of Fame makes a practice of inducting inventors living and dead. They were playing catch-up the evening that Bob Kahn and I were inducted so we got to see a long line of inventors and their inventions honored. What was most interesting about this part of the event is that these were often inventions we took for granted without remembering that they had not always been around and that someone had to invent them first. Things like zippers and paper clips, batteries and automobiles, and so on.

Did you ever think the Internet would morph into such a powerful tool and impact so greatly upon the lives of people with and without hearing loss?

Vint Cerf: Yes, this was a major hope of mine. Actually, electronic mail was something that had been 'invented' in the 1960s on time-sharing systems and networked electronic mail was the most popular application of the ARPANET and was invented by Ray Tomlinson in 1971. It was Ray who chose the '@' sign to separate mailbox identifiers from host names in the ARPANET and later in the Internet.

Ken Harrenstien, then a researcher at SRI International, developed something called DEAFNET in the mid-1970s in an attempt to link people with TTYs to the ARPANET and later to the Internet (which did not become widely available to the academic community until 1983 when the Internet was formally rolled out).

I had always considered that e-mail would be a major benefit to deaf users and was motivated to work towards its widespread availability. I worked

at MCI on the MCI Mail system, a commercial e-mail service, also hoping that this could become of widespread use by the community of users who were unable to use the telephone but could use computers or computer terminals for communication.

During your undergraduate years at Stanford and your graduate years at UCLA, were you given any special accommodations for your hearing loss?

Vint Cerf: No, in some sense I made my own services by helping to work on the ARPANET's protocols and to promote the use of e-mail. Were it not for the popularity of that application, I think I would have had a harder time contributing to the work. Of course, it is very important for your readers to appreciate that I was already by then a 15-year user of binaural hearing aids and was able to use the telephone normally. I was really hearing repaired so I did not need very much in the way of special accommodation, except for patience when I needed to ask people to repeat something.

Your hearing loss was first noticed around age nine and you began wearing hearing aids at age 13. You later became valedictorian of your high school class. Were your hearing aids a big help then and are they still?

Vint Cerf: They were then and they are now. I felt a real need for them when I realized that sitting in the front row to hear the teacher meant that I often didn't hear the question that the teacher was answering! I still rely very heavily on the help that I get from hearing aids and I am grateful for the utility of this technology.

Did either of your parents live to witness any of your achievements, and from which parent did you inherit your inventive streak?

Vint Cerf: My father passed away at age 53 just nine months before I completed my Ph.D., so he never really got to see the Internet or even much of its predecessors. My mother is still living at age 93 so she has lived through this entire period of Internet's evolution. My father was a studious and academically competitive person and my mother had

a wonderful sense of humor and a love of classical music. Our home was filled with books and I was encouraged to excel in school. I think I am a product mix of their DNA in the literal and figurative sense.

You played the cello, and when you were 15, you were invited to attend a master class led by the famed Spanish cellist Pablo Casals. What was that like, and do you still play?

Vint Cerf: I was stunned to hear Pablo Casals' playing at UC Berkeley around 1958. The rich and seemingly effortless way in which he made the instrument sing seemed ineffable and magic. I was by no means a prodigy but felt deeply privileged to participate in this event. Shortly thereafter, however, I was introduced the SAGE (Semi-Automated Ground Environment) computing system at the System Development Corporation in Santa Monica.

My father had a good friend who worked there on its software. I became mesmerized by the possibilities that computers offered and found myself torn between serious study of the cello and pursuit of computing. By 1960, my best friend, Steve Crocker, got permission for both of us to begin using the computers at UCLA while we were still in high school. I shamelessly abandoned the cello for the computer and, 50 years later, I really regret not having kept up with both.

You have said: 'You can learn something from everyone.' What have you learned from your wife, your two sons?

Vint Cerf: From Sigrid I have learned that the best form of leadership is to simply start doing it. Others will join in and follow your lead. She has done this so many times and with such great effect. The best example is her bread making project that started in 1979. Ultimately she baked about 50,000 loaves of bread in her little kitchen in our house and she sold these loaves and the profits were turned over to charity. She started this on her own, stimulated to do so by the starvation in Cambodia. This poignant effort was picked up in the local press and TV and soon she had many volunteers to take

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orders, prepare ingredients and deliver loaves.

David has taught me that anything worth knowing is worth knowing well. When he gets interested in something, he really wants to know how it works down to the finest detail and most basic aspect. He is a stunningly good teacher and patient beyond any reasonable expectation. He is a fascinating combination of my interest in technology and Sigrid's interest in art.

Bennett has inherited Sigrid's great heart. He brings enormous energy to any effort but has an ability to empathize with others that I consider a rare gift. He is a creative photographer and, like his brother, he has found ways to marry art and technology. I am deeply aware that both of our sons are products of our respective interests and strengths. Genetics works!

An author, you are currently working on a total of five books, including a biography of Sigrid. What will you call it?

Vint Cerf: It's going to be titled *I Heard That!* and will tell Sigrid's story of growing up deaf, lipreading her way through school and life, and at age 53, after 50 years of silence, getting her first cochlear implant. It was a life changing experience and a second

implant in the other ear, ten years later, simply added to the quality of life. Sigrid's story is as poignant and as encouraging as any story of overcoming adversity can be.

You have said you are fascinated with cochlear implants and the computer-brain connection. Would you explain this for us?

Vint Cerf: It's the best example I've seen of electroneural technology. We can take that same understanding and pursue optical implants. Further down the track, some 25 years away, I estimate implants will be used to route nerve signals around the damaged portions of the spine. There are at least two people that I know who have implants that allow them to get up and walk. They were paraplegics. It may sound far-fetched, but then again, years ago, so did the Internet.

What are your thoughts about the Deaf culture controversy and cochlear implants?

Vint Cerf: Like it or not the population of implantees is going to go up. Deaf parents who have lost their hearing as they grew up are increasingly keen to have their children implanted to ensure the quality of life they remembered from their own youth. It's critical for children to have the implants early, because they learn speech in the first three years of life.

Back in 1988, you were a strong supporter of commercializing the Internet system, because you felt it wouldn't spread very far. What's your feeling today?

Vint Cerf: Plainly, the commercialization of the Internet was an important step toward its widespread access to the general public. Despite all the continuing concerns for privacy and security, and the tensions introduced by competition (or lack of it in broadband carriage), I still believe that commercialization was the only viable path towards making the Internet something accessible to and affordable by the general public.

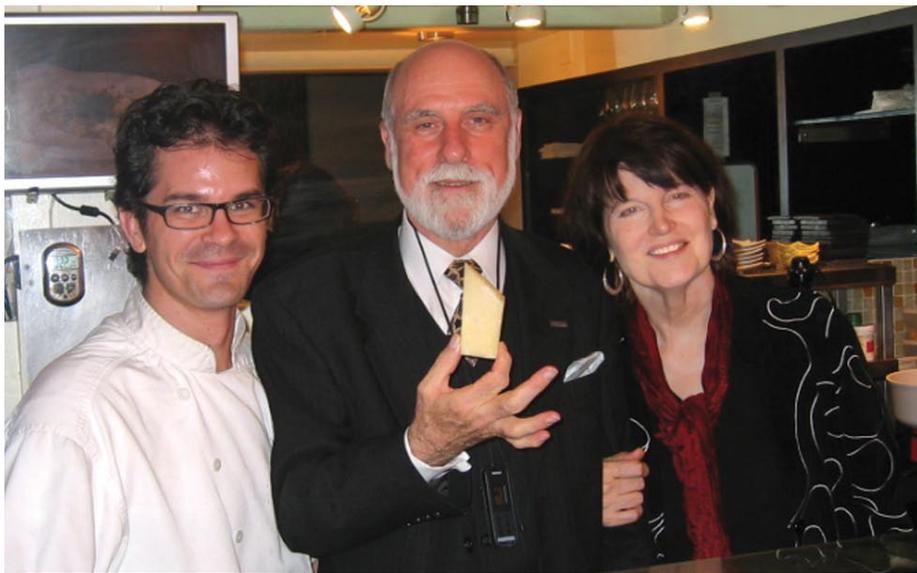
The Internet was designed for openness and accessibility for everyone around the globe. As a result, we have viruses, pornography, spam and so on. How can we prevent these abuses?

Vint Cerf: Well, you cannot absolutely prevent them but several steps can be taken to mitigate their impact. Using anti-virus software can help. Using e-mail services that filter for viruses and spam can help. Using cloud computing applications can also help because the software in the cloud (e.g., Google applications) can be maintained with more fidelity than each of us can maintain the software in our laptops and desktops (and now our mobiles and personal digital assistants).

We can also engage law enforcement to prosecute when we discover perpetrators of harm through the use of the Internet. That's going to take some work on the international front because the aggressor may be in one country's jurisdiction while the victim in another. Many of the abuses that occur on the Internet are already illegal and can be prosecuted under existing laws. Other abuses may be peculiar to the Internet (e.g., viruses and spam) and may need new laws to cover them.

In a video, you discuss Net neutrality and how President Barack Obama is helping with it. Tell us more.

Vint Cerf: The president is helping with policies that endorse open and non-discriminatory access to broadband residential Internet services. Net Neutrality



The Cerfs at Cafe Atlantico (Minibar) with Chef Michael Turner (now at Jose Andres' new Bazaar in Los Angeles)

is a buzzword for the concept that users should have non-discriminatory access to any service offered anywhere on the Internet. The broadband Internet access provider should not control which services users have access to, nor should they discriminate in favor of their own services in competition with others. Just because a broadband access provider provides the underlying carriage of Internet packets should not give the provider the authority to interfere with the higher level and possibly competitive services of others. Whether this principle needs to be codified in law remains a matter of debate but I think the principle is critical and I believe it to be an accepted position by the present administration.

Your sense of humor is evident in a video where you are about to address a group and you pull open your suit jacket and you are seen wearing a T-shirt that says: "I P ON EVERYTHING!" How did that go over?

Vint Cerf: I wore this T-shirt at an Internet Engineering Task Force meeting around 1992 and it was intended to reinforce my commitment to put the Internet Protocol on virtually any communication substrate. It went over so well that some guy came running up and stuck a \$5 bill in my waistband.

You travel around the world as Google's chief Internet evangelist. What is the most fascinating place you have visited? Where haven't you been that you would like to go?

Vint Cerf: Actually, I think the most interesting places have been the ones I visited on behalf of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) which I chaired for seven years. The two places that had the greatest impact on me were Ghana and Kiribati. Both places are challenged to get good access to the Internet and both benefit from it in many ways. Kiribati is a tiny coral reef that extends above sea level in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and struck me as vulnerable to rising sea levels and global warming as well as the economic crisis that grips us at present.

As to where I would like to go that I haven't, I think I would like very much

to make it to Nepal and to see Everest at least from not too far away. I'm no mountain climber but the majesty of the peaks of Nepal have long had a kind of Shangri-La attraction.

You are working with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory on extending the Internet's reach into outer space. Does this mean Earthlings and Martians will soon be e-mailing with each other?

Vint Cerf: The project began in 1998 with a team at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, and a team at MITRE Corporation in Fairfax County, Virginia. Our purpose was to develop communication standards that would allow human and robotic communication in space with the same kind of flexibility that we enjoy on the Internet here on planet Earth.

This year we will be testing the Interplanetary Internet Protocols on the International Space Station and a spacecraft called EPOXI that is on its way to visit a comet in 2010. Once these tests are done, we will offer the new communication protocols to all space-faring nations to establish a standard communication environment for space exploration in the remainder of the 21st Century.

How would you like to be remembered?

Vint Cerf: I hope I will be remembered as someone who truly wanted to extend the infrastructure of a communication technology that really promotes the democratic sharing of knowledge on a global basis.

Interview with Sigrid T. Cerf

Barbara Chertok: You and I met in California in the 1970s when Vint was on the faculty at Stanford and my husband was a guest scientist there. We were primarily communicating by lipreading in those days. Did you ever dream we would be hearing with bilateral cochlear implants today?

Sigrid: No way. Of course such technology was never going to happen. Did we even have a clue what we were missing? Around that time, my hearing dropped from 90 dB to 100 dB hearing after an ear infection. With such limited audi-

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Sigrid Cerf at home in Virginia

tory cues, it was difficult to compensate with my lipreading skills. Vint and I found ourselves limiting whom we socialized with, since there weren't many whom I could still lipread. A body hearing aid gave me practically no help and other assistive devices also proved useless.

You lost your hearing at age three from spinal meningitis and were fitted with a body hearing aid. Your mother took you to the John Tracy Clinic in Los Angeles founded by Spencer Tracy's wife and named for their deaf son. Why did she choose this program for you?

Sigrid: My mother's brother in LA encouraged us to attend Tracy's six-week summer session. New as it was, the school had positively impacted a growing number of children. They even offered a correspondence course which in retrospect was a precursor to the digital education we now take for granted. My mother learned we would both have to work hard to retain my speech and listening skills. The therapy at Tracy went beyond those six weeks and included my mother's close working relationship with my teachers.

Uniquely, my mother advised my teachers to NOT intentionally single me out as a special student. My deafness was never discussed with me,

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and therefore I was never forthcoming when others misunderstood my communication needs. While sitting in the front row, all I had to do was ask a nearby student to point to a page. That's how many of us got our education in those days.

The schools in your hometown of Wichita did not offer any special services to students with hearing loss, yet you graduated with honors. You went on to earn a bachelor's degree at Kansas State University in 1965 in art and architectural illustrating. Did you work in your field?

Sigrid: Yes, I became an architectural illustrator for commercial interior design firms in Los Angeles. It was fun to create drawings and paintings of interiors to give them dramatic interest. My favorite project was the renovation of the floating Queen Mary that's docked in Long Beach Harbor. I retired from this work when our first son was two and Vint's travel took him out of town more and more.

In 1996, after wearing hearing aids for 50 years and your hearing had dropped precipitously, you received a cochlear implant from Dr. John Niparko at Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore followed by an implant in the other ear ten years later. What's the difference between unilateral versus bilateral cochlear implant hearing?

Sigrid: The difference for me is better comprehension of speech in ambient noise and richer sound quality. The newly-implanted ear had auditory memory, but it had not heard since I was 3 years old. This second implant (bilateral) effectively complements and supplements the hearing from my primary ear, and the improved technology gives clearer speech comprehension as demonstrated in tests given by my audiologist at Hopkins, Jennifer Yeagle. An important thing is to remember to put it on each morning up to an hour before I use the other one. This practice seems to give the new ear better acuity and also allows it to better complement the primary ear.

"Vint was suddenly married to a 53-year old 'teenager'. After never having access to the phone, for example, I immediately embraced this toy. We had two phone lines, and when he called, he'd find both lines tied up for hours."

You took the initiative to develop your own rehabilitation program after you were implanted, but many don't know where to begin. What can you tell a new CI recipient?

Sigrid: I would advise them that any self-therapy is useful, even if they are following a formal rehabilitation course. Never having actually considered my rehabilitation as 'therapy', I considered it a game where I practiced listening, and relied less on visual cues. An example is watching TV. Some news and public TV programs make great sources for relaxed listening practice if you pretend the TV is a radio instead of something to view. Those who still rely on speechreading might watch but turn off the captions whenever possible. New recipients can sometimes be referred to an auditory therapist at their CI center to initiate the rehab process. New software, workbooks and online materials offered by the implant manufacturers can be utilized as well.

Vint says you want to capture every decibel of sound and carry with you patch cords and assistive devices that connect to every possible sound source.

Sigrid: With my implants, I'm eager—greedy—to have what seems like 'normal hearing' and use whatever assistive system is appropriate for the environment. I use my personal FM system when I'm with someone who mumbles or has a foreign accent. At a lecture, I use the FM transmitter and place it on the lectern, and it transmits a signal to the receiver that I plug into my body processor.

In cars, restaurants and other places where I'm trying to hear several people, I use an auxiliary microphone when needed. It plugs into the jack of my body processor. I use a patch cord to listen to music on my Walkman or listen to books on tape or books on CD. When I watch TV, I use an infrared

transceiver to pick up the audio that goes directly into my body processor—similarly with movies. When I'm on an airplane, I use a patch cord to plug into the armrest. What is neat about this is the crying baby is completely cut off, because the only sound I hear is what's coming from the sound system on the movie.

You were unable to hear on the phone until you received your first cochlear implant at age 53, yet you claim 'the telephone is usually the easiest form of listening for me.'

Sigrid: Having a phone at one's ear is like listening to a person talking directly into your ear, because the signal-to-noise ratio is ideal. Whenever I can approach this ideal ratio—as I do with all of my assistive gadgets—I maximize my opportunity to hear well.

You have said the cochlear implant radically altered your life, changing you from an introvert to an extrovert. How did Vint relate to this new wife?

Sigrid: Well, you can imagine how your husband would feel if you announced 'now I don't have to look at you anymore.' A less than flattering way of saying 'now we can communicate almost normally.'

Vint was suddenly married to a 53-year old 'teenager'. After never having access to the phone, for example, I immediately embraced this toy. We had two phone lines, and when he called, he'd find both lines tied up for hours. I might be talking to a telemarketer in Bangalore about English accents in his city and then switch to the other line to catch this guy from Hyderabad who's telling me what his English classes were like. My quality of life had increased, and the husband who was delighted I could finally use the phone discovered he could never reach me. Now he had to resort to e-mail!

Any favorite hobbies or pastimes?

Sigrid: We love to entertain. I recently hosted 21 women friends from my high school, and we spent a week touring Washington, D.C. One of our favorite pastimes is viewing DVD movies in our new home theater. I'm also a big reader and fan of book clubs,

which are a good forum for observing other people's listening skills and practicing my own. We've accumulated 10,000 books in our library.

Vint's hearing aid dealer played the matchmaker and introduced the two of you. You have been married for 43 years. Was your mutual hearing loss the attraction, or was it something more?

Sigrid: Vint had—and still has—humor, a warm heart, wisdom, and great sensitivity. Plus he's analytical and could fix almost anything. But what really turned me on was his enthusiasm. When you think about it, people with great social skills are enthusiastic about life. I loved that he could talk to anybody about practically anything. Of course his up-front, can-do attitude about his hearing loss was an inspiration for me to 'come out' about my deafness. He's always shared with people what he needed with a touch of humor thrown in, and by so doing, others would find it easy to meet him halfway. By observing him, I gradually became less reluctant to keep my own listening needs invisible and began to bloom.

When you accepted Vint's proposal of marriage, did you have an inkling that Vint was destined for success?

Sigrid: I sensed his excitement about what might someday be done with computers. But amidst this private language of geeks, I really had no idea. I soon learned about the demands of being a computer programmer.

Vint would disappear for days. Since I couldn't use the phone, I just assumed I would eventually see him sooner or later. He and his UCLA friends organized their lives around access to the mainframe computers which were often available only when others went home. The pattern continued when he taught at Stanford.

Somehow he combined teaching classes and took red-eye flights on weekends to test the early nodes of the ARPANET (the precursor to the Internet). I had no idea that we'd eventually have the vast Internet and Web to make staying in touch so effortless. We really are resting on the shoulders of these hardworking giants.

Your two sons live on the west coast. What was it like raising them as a mother with a profound hearing loss, and how do you stay in touch with them?

Sigrid: At its easiest, it was a pleasure, as most parents find. At its most difficult, it was like what parents enjoy when their kids become independent teenagers. The independence appeared to start at an earlier age, because they shouldered more responsibilities on my behalf. I often needed them for help with phone calls, for example. You rarely know what enters a child's mind and how they feel when they sense their parent is different from everyone else's. Vint often sees them on his travels to California. We also phone, e-mail, and do instant messaging and video chat.

You grew up outside the deaf community—speaking and reading lips. How do you feel about the controversy over cochlear implants for children and the Deaf culture community's choice of American Sign Language over spoken English language?

Sigrid: It's always been a quality of life issue about what parents feel is best for their children and not what the children might want when they're old enough to decide for themselves. Since most parents are themselves hearing, they want their children to maximize their listening and speaking skills and more fully participate in the many opportunities life offers.

As to sign language in theaters, the theaters are failing to meet the needs of the majority of those with hearing loss because the majority of the deaf and hard of hearing population does NOT use sign language. So, the more people that request captions in theatres, the more likely those people with hearing loss—

the non-signers—will be able to enjoy theatrical and other cultural events.

Is there a humorous episode related to your hearing loss that you can share with us?

Sigrid: Before my cochlear implant days, Vint was running low on cash and needed some to pay a cab driver to bring him home from a snowed-in airport.

Vint called: 'Hi Sigrid, it's Vint. Can you come to the airport to pick me up?'

Sigrid: 'I'm sorry he's not at home. He'll be home soon, would you like to call back?'

Vint [screaming into the phone]: 'It's Vint, your husband! Can you pick me up at the airport?'

Sigrid: 'I'm really sorry, but he isn't here. He should be home any minute now. Could you call back?'

Vint: '[unprintable]' 🗿



Barbara Liss Chertok is a former speechreading/lip-reading teacher and a freelance writer. Her articles appear regularly in hearing loss journals. She lost her hearing suddenly at age 21

due to an autoimmune disease and hears bilaterally with two cochlear implants. She has been an advocate of the rights of people with hearing loss since the 1970s and joined HLAA when it was founded in 1979. She is an active member of the HLAA Sarasota Chapter. She serves on the board of the American Hearing Research Foundation. She can be reached at barbchert@aol.com.



Help Us Celebrate HLAA's 30th Birthday at Convention 2009!

When? Friday, June 19, 2009

Where? Nashville, Opryland Hotel

For details, visit www.hearingloss.org.