

## What a Difference a Voice Can Make

by Susie N. Rodde

**A**t the age of 23, I really wanted to learn as well as listen. It was then that Rick Hohn entered my life, later becoming my husband.

Now, Rick is a well-known AAC communicator. Back in 1975, however, he communicated with me through a few different ways: his limited speech, a spelling board that he used with a head stylus and his body language.

At Santa Monica College in 1975, Rick pursued me until he got my attention. Although he had a severe communication disorder, I didn't care if he talked to me with his limited oral speech or his low-tech word board. I wanted to listen to what he had in his heart. It disturbed me when people limited him because of his disability. I knew he was capable of doing more than even he thought or believed he could achieve.

Rick and I tried marriage for a few years, but it didn't work. Little did I know that learning to communicate with Rick was preparing me to converse with other nonverbal people. In my early 30's, I had a neighbor, Alicia, who communicated by spelling using her head—letter by letter, word-for-word until sentences, thoughts, and feelings were completely expressed. She was just another human being to me, but at times communication could take hours if I misunderstood her because she misspelled a word. Although Alicia may misspell at times, and it may take longer overall, she does very well considering her level of education.

It wasn't long after I met Alicia that she was given a communication device, which she operates with her foot. Her device makes it so much easier and quicker to communicate with her.

I have also met another neighbor in my housing complex, Brent, who is in his early 40's. Although he has speech, it isn't very clear unless one has an ear trained to understand his speech. I couldn't understand him very well. He also communicated with his body expressions. When Brent was given a communication device, it made life so much easier for both of us. I can have conversations with him when he uses his device. What a difference a voice can make.

I recently became reacquainted with Rick because Alicia asked me for his email address. We had gone our separate ways. He now communicates through a speaking device. Although I wasn't shocked, since many of my nonverbal friends use speech-generating systems, I was relieved that I could just listen to what he had to say instead of putting my energy into reading his low-tech word board or trying to understand his speech. Even though we don't talk that much, or see one another, many things have changed since Rick received his communication device. It makes communicating with him easier, as well as quicker, than when we met over 30 years ago. What a difference a voice can make.

With each nonverbal person who has entered my life, I have



learned that there are days when their device may not be working, or they may not be having a good day. There are times they use spelling boards, body language, or spell with their eyes. Overall, communicating with them is now different from in the past. The difference is that their AAC devices make it easier for them to communicate and for me to be a communication partner.

When I was younger, I used a manual wheelchair to go out with family and friends. Being in a manual chair made me feel lost—dependent on someone to move me from place to place, as well as to take me from place to place. Now, having my power chair, I'm free. I am not dependent on anyone to help me get from point A to point B. My power chair is my "wheels." It is my legs. It allows me to wheel around wherever, whenever I please. The freedom is similar to when I got my first set of hearing aids. They allowed me to hear birds sing and look up at God's beautiful creation. So, it is the same difference with my having conversations with my friends before and after speech generating devices. We have more freedom to communicate due to today's technology.

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