

MY EARS HAD WHISKERS

Ruth D. Bernstein

This story is about a caring, intelligent cat, who became an assistive listening and alerting system for her hard of hearing friend.

Cindy, a beautiful cafe au lait Siamese kitten with friendly blue eyes, became part of my life when I got my first hearing aid. The aid was the signal I would have to cope with the progressive sensori neural loss that is part of the genetic legacy handed down to me and my children by my father and grandfather.

Cindy and I became friends instantly. During the day, she was a hunter, roaming through our suburban backyard. Evenings she curled up on my lap as I read in the family room. At night she slept in my brown velvet chair, guarding it against anyone who might want to dispossess me.

As I grew older I needed a second hearing aid because my hearing loss became progressively worse. Although I was having more trouble understanding speech, I was aware of the sounds around me - my four children coming and going, doors slamming and the phone and doorbell ringing. And, there was always someone around to tell me if I missed something.

Then, suddenly, I was divorced and found myself in a totally different world. Cindy and I moved from the house to an apartment in New York City. Even though the cat was my constant companion, I was lonely and frightened. I could no longer hear the phone or doorbell ring and there was no one to alert me to those sounds. That was when I discovered my ears had whiskers. Surprisingly, Cindy seemed to understand my problem. When the phone rang or someone came to my door she would sit bolt upright, turn her head towards the sound and twitch her whiskers. If I didn't react immediately, she would purr so loudly I could feel her body vibrate. She always made sure she was nearby, sitting on my lap while I read and sleeping with me at night. She was my alarm clock, waking me at six thirty by walking across my pillow until I gave her a good morning hug. Weekends, I got out of bed at 6:30 AM and fed her because I was never able to convince her it wasn't time to get up. Then we would snuggle together under the covers and go back to sleep.

I didn't realize how dependent I had become on this special alerting system until, at the old age of seventeen, Cindy developed acute kidney failure and died. I was devastated. I lost my loving companion and extra set of ears. I considered getting another cat and rejected the idea because I traveled a lot for business. That was when I began searching for devices that could replace Cindy and found I needed an assistive alerting system - flashers for the phone and doorbell, a strobe light smoke alarm and vibrating alarm clock . Although the technology works well, it doesn't replace Cindy's ability to keep me tuned in to the sounds around me. I really miss my "ears with whiskers."

Ruth D. Bernstein, M.A., is a Board member of the HLAA New York City Chapter. She writes a blog for the "Sound Advice" column in "*The Buzz*", the Center for Hearing and Communication's electronic newsletter.