

Helping Us Hear (and Live) Better: A Q&A with Audiology Concierge's Nancy Jablonski



Audiology Concierge founder Nancy Jablonski began her company to improve people's quality of life through customized professional service and the latest hearing technologies.

As we age, hearing with acuity helps us maintain our independence, well-being and connectedness. Conversely, the loss of hearing leads to fewer social interactions, increased isolation and compromised safety. Untreated hearing loss is now linked to reduced mental capacity, depression, even dementia and Alzheimer's.

Audiologist Nancy Jablonski has dedicated her career to helping people of all ages address hearing loss. Her one-on-one consultations include frequent visits to Chester Village West. Nancy built her business, Audiology Concierge, to deliver personalized service, state of the art hearing technology and better quality of life to thousands of clients in Connecticut.

We recently chatted with Nancy to discover how she works and what drives her success.

Q: You are a perfect example of reinventing oneself, and one's career, at different stages in life. After a 25-year hiatus from your work as an audiologist, what factors motivated you to again help people hear better?

A: In 2005 I suddenly lost my husband to leukemia. I needed to find a job that would "consume me" so that I could deal with my loss. I've always wanted to go

back to Audiology but feared that I had been away too long. I have a strong background in business, so I decided to look for a job in the manufacturing sector of audiology for hearing aid manufacturers. I had to learn about modern technology. When I practiced audiology in 1978 we adjusted hearing aids with screw drivers. Today, computers now adjust hearing aids. For seven years, I traveled throughout New England teaching my colleagues in private practice, universities, clinics and hospitals.

In 2012, I gave myself a 60th birthday present and quit my job. I've always wanted a private practice and this was the perfect time. I know the challenges the hearing-impaired face, especially the elderly. Hearing aids don't always have the best reputation, especially when they not presented by a qualified audiologist. Everyone knows someone who has invested thousands of dollars on hearing aids that sit in dresser drawers. **I was on a mission to change this.**

Q: Who or what inspired you to create Audiology Concierge?

A: My 91-year-old mother was my inspiration. She was extremely hearing impaired. I fit her with state of the art technology. This allowed her to maintain her independence. She encouraged me to help her hearing-impaired friends to enjoy the same quality of life as she did.

Hearing is like vision in that as we age, for many reasons, we lose the clarity in both senses. Unlike vision, however, correcting hearing is much more complicated. We visit the eye doctor to get glasses and we're good to go. Hearing aid fitting and technology is very different; it takes time to program and customize hearing aids to one's specific hearing needs. Care and maintenance is not as easy as cleaning lenses. Learning how to insert hearing aids is another part of the learning curve.

I started Audiology Concierge to help individuals to better understand their hearing loss and to provide quality hearing aid devices at reasonable prices. Along with that, we provide excellent follow-up service every six months for the life of the instruments, since hearing may change over time. By bringing services directly into people's homes, we can assess their specific needs in a comfortable setting. We spend a great deal of time with our clients to make sure they are getting the maximum benefit from their amplification during a 30-day free trial period. We

visit our patients each week to assess their performance, counseling them and making fine tuning adjustments.

Q: Hearing loss can begin early in life. Knowing what you know now, what do you tell people in their teens to 60's to help them preserve their hearing?

A: I had the first signs of hearing loss in my early 50's. It started with ringing in my ears (tinnitus). I noticed that I was missing things people said. I've been wearing hearing aids for the past 5 years. I'm a baby boomer. I've listened to loud music as a teenager and young adult. Noise exposure is toxic to hearing. Noise exposure is cumulative, once exposed the damage accumulates. You will find me lecturing my young lawn "boys" to put on ear protection as they weed whack and run their loud lawn mowing equipment. Young people are addicted to their plugged-in music. When I go to the gym, I can hear music from adjacent treadmills. I'm afraid that many of these individuals will be my patients as they get older and it will be before they reach their 70s and 80s!

Q: What technology advances are making it possible for people with hearing loss to hear more clearly? In what ways are the new hearing devices superior?

A: Technology has exploded. Research and development has helped us improve the solutions. We hear with our brain and manufacturers are developing technology that mimics "brain hearing". We have two ears that work together to provide spatial awareness and localization. Today's hearing aids "talk to each other" ...so the right and left ear work together, rather than independently. What's more, Bluetooth technology allows us to wirelessly connect our hearing devices with our smart phones, TVs and more.

Q: Describe the hearing evaluation process – how do you go about testing seniors' hearing levels? Prescribing and fitting today's custom hearing devices?

A: Our full audiological evaluation begins with determining the threshold levels that people can hear of various frequencies (pitches). In addition, we evaluate each person's ability to understand speech when made loud enough. This is an important test to determine whether there are distortion issues. Once these levels are tested and a hearing loss is determined, we program hearing aids to demonstrate corrected hearing. I always explain that this is like visiting the eye doctor and the experience you have when he puts a corrected lens before your eye to show you how you should be seeing. This is the same concept. We provide

a demonstration of how the individual should hear because hearing loss occurs slowly over time and we forget what normal hearing sounds like. We can show, in real time, what sounds the person can hear and which sounds they are missing. Most people first start missing the consonants sounds. These are the most important sounds since they carry the intelligibility of language. Without consonants, they are playing “wheel of fortune” depending on visual and contextual clues to “fill in the blanks”. In addition, our brain slows down as we age so it takes us longer to process and understand what we hear.

Q: Are today’s hearing aid devices affordable? How can people pay for them – e.g. a combination of insurance, private pay, Medicare?

A: Yes, hearing aid devices can be affordable, however it’s more important than ever that you seek professional guidance. Audiologists are highly trained and educated professionals and should be your first and only stop when looking to have your hearing tested and finding a quality hearing device. This is important as often patients are paying out of pocket as Medicare does not cover the cost of hearing aids and there are very few insurance companies that have hearing aid benefits. Audiology Concierge offers no interest payment plans to our patients on a budget to make it more affordable.

It’s important to note that hearing aids are considered a “big business”. There is a tremendous amount of advertising in this industry. It is important to find a professional that you can trust. Hearing aids are sold at Costco and drug stores. Their level of technology, service and follow up care does not equal ours.

Q: How have you helped Chester Village West residents improve their hearing?

A: We have helped many CVW stay connected to their families and friends. Our services are important to retirement facilities to keep residents engaged and active during their senior years. There's a great deal of literature that says untreated hearing loss often results in cognitive decline. Studies suggest that something as simple as wearing hearing aids will help cognition and memory.

Q: Your brochure lists monthly free hearing clinics at 11 senior centers and communities. How can the public sign up for these clinics? What happens at the clinics – what should they bring and expect to happen?

We provide free hearing clinics at senior center in East Lyme, Lyme, Madison, Guilford, Northford, Fairfield, Stamford, Darien and Mansfield. We offer a weekly hearing clinic at Family Medicine Associates in Old Saybrook. We also provide clinics at six retirement communities in the region, including Chester Village West.

At the clinics, we offer free hearing tests, listening demonstrations, cleaning and repairing of hearing aids. We recommend that individuals bring along any medical records and hearing tests that are relevant to our services. Visit our website at <http://audiologyconcierge.com/clinic-schedule/> for the full schedule and instructions on how best to sign up for an upcoming clinic. If you don't have access to the website, you can call us at [203-668-0619](tel:203-668-0619).

“Independent Senior Living is all about retirees enjoying life and socializing with their neighbors, especially during dinner time. I learned that five of our residents were choosing not to go to the dining room because it became too difficult to hear and understand conversation. In 2013 Nancy Jablonski and René Vicedomini approached me with their concept of bringing Audiology Concierge to Chester Village West and working with those with hearing difficulties; I hesitated, and then said yes. In retrospect, it turned out to be one of the best decisions I could have made for our community. Within the first few months, the residents who were avoiding the dining room had re-engaged with their friends and shared their success stories with me. Since that time, Nancy and Rene have continued to aid those with hearing difficulties and are always considerate of the privacy and individual needs of each resident they serve at Chester Village West.” – *Robert (Bob) Taylor, Executive Director, Chester Village West*



Nancy and her business partner, Hearing Instrument Specialist Rene Vicedomini, work together to fit the right technology to improve their clients' hearing.