

# Honoring My Mentor with **Volley4Sound**

BY KELSEY BRANDIN

## Margie Schools Me About Life With Hearing Loss

On my first day of preschool, I remember screaming at the top of my lungs that I didn't want to go to school as I entered the building. Many other kids were very excited, but I was terrified. I knew it would be different for me. I was scared of how other students would react; I knew that they would stare. At the front door of the classroom, I begged my mother, "Don't make me go!" I'm pretty sure that landed at the top of her list of nightmarish moments.



Above: Kelsey and Margie meet for lunch in 2018. Her favorite restaurant was always California Pizza Kitchen. This was their last lunch together. Right: Kelsey started playing volleyball in 2012 whenever her father needed extra players at the beach. Below: These are all of the participants who came out to support Volley4Sound in 2019.



**I so appreciate all that Margie did to encourage me through the years. I want to close with something she said that continues to inspire me: "Being unique is better than being perfect."**

When I reached kindergarten, my teacher noticed that none of my classmates wanted to play with me, because I couldn't hear them. She informed my parents, who had begun to notice that something was off. My younger brother was developing better than I was, and he was able to speak well before I could. They took me to a doctor who diagnosed me with severe bilateral hearing loss.

I was fitted with hearing aids at the age of four and was paired with an FM system. An FM system transmits sound directly from the sound source to the receiver. The teacher was the sound source, and he or she held onto a microphone that hung around his or her neck. I had a device wrapped around my waist with wires that were connected to my hearing aids. I was responsible for making sure the batteries were fully charged every day, as well as handing the microphone to my teachers before classes started.

I appreciated receiving that support at school, but the defining moment came when I was assigned a hearing specialist named Margie Hindenlang from the Los Angeles County Office of Education. I still remember the day I met Margie. I was in the principal's office. I was so scared in the meeting that I sat on Margie's lap. Twice a week, she would pull me out of class to





Left: Margie visited Kelsey in the classroom for a special event in 2002. Below: Kelsey, age eight in 2001, playing soccer—her favorite sport. Kelsey has three siblings and her father was often the coach and commissioner.

check on my hearing aids and assist with my education. I was always very excited to see her and, according to Margie, I would tell her about my problems with my brother. While her main job was to provide services that would help me with my education, she went above and beyond by helping me grow to become the person I am today.

Margie always made sure I was not alone by telling stories that I could relate to; it helped that she was also deaf in one ear. The hearing loss community near me was very small—and it seemed even smaller since it included no one my age. I felt comfortable asking Margie the weirdest, toughest questions, including:

- “What do people talk about in a normal conversation?”
- “How do you explain to your kids that you can’t hear, and how do they react when you tell them?”
- “What do you do in a situation when you can’t hear your friends?”
- “Why does everyone always say ‘never mind’ when I ask them to repeat themselves?”
- “What if people don’t want to be friends with me because of my disability?”
- “How do you manage frustration when everyone laughs at a joke that you didn’t hear?” and
- “Do you ever feel like you’re alone and left out when trying to be a part of a group conversation with friends or family?”

My questions were endless! I always felt that Margie would have the answer; I knew she would understand. We would laugh and cry about stories of situations that only those with hearing loss would face, and sometimes those stories were from the HLAA magazine, *Hearing Life*. If it weren’t for her, I would not have heard about HLAA, which helped me realize that I’m not alone.

### **I Achieve Goals On and Off the Playing Field**

I hated my hearing aids so much, I often wished I would lose them, but I was forced to wear them when I attended school. All my life, I’d been hiding: I’d worn my hair

down to cover my hearing aids—even while playing sports. I’d been shy and afraid to speak, but playing sports helped me build tremendous self-confidence. At every soccer, basketball or softball game, my dad would let the referee, umpire, coaches and sometimes the other parents know that I wore hearing aids and could not hear well. I would snap at him, because I didn’t want anyone to know about my disability. I didn’t want them to see me as a weak opponent. I wanted them to value me for being myself before they remembered me as the girl who couldn’t hear.

It was not easy in the beginning. I’d dribble the soccer ball all the way down to the other half of the field, feeling excited to score a goal, and then turn around to see disappointed looks on spectators’ faces, since I was offside, not realizing that the whistle had already been blown. To add more embarrassment, the coach on the other side of the field would yell at me and ask for a red penalty flag. Incidents like this helped me understand why my dad informed the referee and coaches of my hearing loss. (Many said I was a great example when coaches advised, “Don’t stop until you hear the whistle blow!”)

Sometimes it was great! I didn’t hear my parents or coaches yelling or telling me what to do from the sidelines, and sometimes I’d pretend I hadn’t heard my name called when I was supposed to sub out.

Socializing was a challenge at first. It took me a long time to adjust. I’ve always wondered: why me? Why did I, of all people, have to deal with this disability? (In high school, I declined accommodations because I was afraid I wouldn’t be accepted or make friends if my classmates knew. I wanted to be like everyone else and hang out with the cool kids.) Luckily, the skills I developed playing sports did the hard work for me. Playing sports helped me learn teamwork, and I was able to bond with others through our shared love of sports. The playing fields were my stress-free environment; I didn’t worry about wearing my hearing aids.

As senior year came along, I had to prepare to say goodbye to Margie, since I would no longer need her services after graduation. Her perspective was so helpful to me. She thought the two of us were lucky because we had an opportunity to stand out and that it was a great gift to be different from others. She told me there was nothing wrong with showing the whole world what I am. So I



guess the question I should have been asking all along was, “Why not me?”

Margie waited to retire until I graduated from high school. She had been with me for 14 years, so she felt and understood my frustration, isolation and difficulties with hearing loss. I decided to write her a thank you letter, and it helped me express my thoughts.

## Margie Hindenlang Inspires Volley4Sound

Margie and I stayed in touch and grabbed lunch once a month while I was attending college, but sadly, in December 2012, she told me she had been diagnosed with lung cancer. I didn’t want to believe it.

A few months later, Margie spoke of herself confidently as a cancer survivor, but she was constantly either on chemotherapy or at doctors’ appointments. This went on for several years. In 2017, she mentioned that she had a few setbacks with cancer. I didn’t get to see her for lunch as much I wanted to and six months often elapsed between our visits. Then it got to the point where she would cancel every time because she was so frail. It hurt to hear that she was in pain.

I didn’t really know what to do or how to support Margie, but suddenly one night, I had an idea. I decided to organize a charity volleyball fundraiser, since I loved playing beach volleyball with my friends on weekends. When I finally met Margie for lunch, I explained that I wanted to put on a charity event to support her.

Although cancer seemed to be her biggest challenge at the moment, she wanted me to support a cause that meant even more to her: hearing loss. She burst into tears and was speechless as she was unable to put the words together to express her gratitude, but then she laughed when I told her I would do the best I could, as I had never organized anything other than my own birthday party.

I started brainstorming. I thought the best way to raise awareness about people with hearing loss was to enable everyone to experience its difficulties. I decided to put a unique spin on beach volleyball by having all players wear earplugs. Then a friend of mine came up with the idea of an auction in which players could rent professional volleyball players to assist them on the court. I reached out to every person in our area who had ever held a volleyball tournament and picked their brains. Another friend stepped up and volunteered to help me with marketing, and still another volunteered to be the master of ceremonies. The community became involved, too. Many businesses donated products for our silent auction and raffle prizes. We also set up a table that challenged willing participants to learn fingerspelling in

American Sign Language. Once I created our Volley4Sound page on Facebook, our event became official!

I now know what it takes to put on an event: it takes a village! Local restaurants, business sponsors, the volleyball community and our friends and families all supported us. I not only learned the process of planning and executing a special event but also learned a lot about myself, including how to deal with stress and manage difficult situations. At the end of the day, all that mattered was that I did the best I could and Volley4Sound was a success!

At our inaugural event in 2018, we raised \$5,000 for No Limits for Deaf Children. Last year, we raised \$10,000 for HLAA. More than 30 professional volleyball players have now joined us, and each year, we have hosted at least 24 teams or more.

The best part has been the feedback I have received. Many participants have been able to feel the frustration of not hearing well when playing with earplugs, and it has helped them understand and feel empathy for the challenges that hearing loss presents. Many have also been excited to learn ASL, which has helped raise awareness. Finally, participants have had a great time and enjoyed the opportunity to support our cause.

It all began with Margie, a very compassionate hearing specialist who became my special mentor and friend. Unfortunately, Margie was too sick to attend our first event and passed away in December 2018, but our tournament will still continue to honor her.

Our annual, 4v4 beach volleyball tournament, Volley4Sound, will take place again in Hermosa Beach, California, on October 17, 2020. We hope even more people will come out to support us this year and join us in raising awareness and having fun on the beach!

I so appreciate all that Margie did to encourage me through the years. I want to close with something she said that continues to inspire me: “Being unique is better than being perfect.” **HL**

*Kelsey Brandin, now 26, was raised in Manhattan Beach, California. She graduated summa cum laude from California State University, Long Beach, in 2016 with a Film Entertainment major. Kelsey has interned with DirecTV, BET and the Tennis Channel. She landed her first job at FOX, but she now works at Comcast NBCUniversal where she is responsible for the safeguarding of NBC Universal Feature and Television digital archival assets across the globe. She still plays volleyball on the beach every weekend. She can be reached at [kelseybrandin@hotmail.com](mailto:kelseybrandin@hotmail.com) and [volley4sound.com](http://volley4sound.com).*

