

My Life, My Words

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My life, my words: T. Alan Hurwitz

Just a few generations ago, deaf people only dreamed of going to college. I know, because I was one of those dreamers. But unlike many of my friends, I had an indomitable mother who stood ready to make that dream come true.

Juliette Ruth Kahn was born in 1916 in Kansas City, Mo. She was deaf, too. I remember her telling me that Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* opened her imagination to the wonder of books when she first read it at the age of 18. Our home was filled with books and, as an only child, I had the luxury of having my mother read to me every day. Once I mastered reading, she still made sure that I read on my own — an hour a day before I could play with friends.

Her enthusiasm for learning was contagious. She was an excellent seamstress and gardener and loved to travel. She loved to tell stories from the books she read to her friends.

During the school year, I attended a residential school for deaf students 500 miles from home. When I went home each summer, my mother would ask her employer for a leave of absence so that she could be home with me. Each time it was denied. So my mother would quit that job and find a new one in the fall. Ten jobs in 10 years — amazing! All so that she could stay home with me. Her last job was a radio assembler and tester, which she kept for 25 years until her retirement.

She encouraged me to get a job, so at 14 I began delivering newspapers. I also worked as a restaurant busboy and a furniture upholsterer. I spent summers chasing turkeys on a farm and washing cars.

My mother showed me what the "real world" was like for deaf people, introducing me to local bakers, seamstresses, assembly workers, farmers and mechanics who were deaf. She took me to picnics, sporting events and deaf social club meetings to talk with other deaf people.

She showed me newspaper articles about successful deaf people — a rarity back then — who were chemists and accountants. She told me, "If they can do it, you can, too."

I decided that education indeed was my ticket to success. I worked hard during high school, without interpreters, tutors or notetakers. I did the best I could in class and then spent hours at home studying every subject and rereading my textbooks.

I left high school with a clear idea of what I wanted to do. I earned bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering and worked at McDonnell Douglas Corp. before joining the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in 1970. When I received my doctorate, Mom was in the audience cheering me on.

I've since been a teacher, an administrator, a dean and president of many of the same deaf organizations to which my mother exposed me years ago. One of my most humbling moments was having my father attend the ceremony during which I became a college dean in 1998. My mother had passed away in 1991, and she would have been so proud.

It's been 40 years since I graduated from college, but it seems like yesterday that my mother and I sat together at the dining room table, talking about everything from first-grade jitters to long-ball hitters. I will never forget her belief in the power of education and how she inspired me to become who I am today.

T. Alan Hurwitz of Pittsford is vice president of Rochester Institute of Technology and dean of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. He has a bachelor's degree from Washington University in St. Louis and a master's from St. Louis University, both in electrical engineering, and a doctorate in teaching and curriculum from the University of Rochester. He and his wife, Vicki, have two children,

Bernard of Rochester and Stephanie of Maryland, and two grandchildren. He has lived in the Rochester area for 35 years.