

The 2018



# Libby Harricks

## Memorial Oration



Libby Harricks Memorial Oration number 20

Honouring the Deafness Forum's first president & profoundly deaf achiever  
**Elisabeth Ann Harricks AM** 1945 – 1998



deafness forum of australia



## **2018 Libby Harricks Memorial Oration**

**Mr Graeme Innes AM**

**Published by Deafness Forum of Australia**

**IBSN 978-0-9807744-7-4**

This work is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission of Deafness Forum of Australia.

# Introduction to the 20<sup>TH</sup> LIBBY HARRICKS MEMORIAL ORATION

Christopher Lind, PhD,  
Chairperson, Libby Harricks Memorial Oration committee



Deafness Forum is both delighted and honoured to have presented the 20th annual Libby Harricks Memorial Oration as part of the Audiology Australia National conference in Sydney, on Sunday, May 20, 2018. The Libby Harricks Memorial Oration is an annual event hosted by Deafness Forum Australia, a not-for-profit organisation that is the peak advocacy body for Deaf and hearing impaired people in Australia (<http://www.deafnessforum.org.au/libby-harricks-memorial-oration>).

The Oration honours one of the outstanding advocates for Deaf and hearing impaired people in Australia, Mrs Libby Harricks, OAM. Libby was the inaugural Chairperson of Deafness Forum of Australia and she worked tirelessly to raise awareness of the need for equality of inclusion in life activities for Deaf and hearing impaired people. In recognition of her advocacy work, Libby was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1990. Following her untimely death in 1998, Deafness Forum of Australia established the annual Libby Harricks Memorial Oration Series to honour her achievements. The Series aims to continue her vision of working towards gaining appropriate recognition, awareness, and access, for hearing impaired people. Over the past 20 years, the Oration series has developed a well-deserved reputation for carrying forward Libby's commitment to raising awareness of issues relating to hearing impairment. The reputation of the oration series is undoubtedly due to the great contributions of our outstanding Orators who have presented on a wide range of relevant topics. The Oration has been sponsored again this year by Audiology Australia, and the Deafness Forum and Oration committee thank them for their patronage.

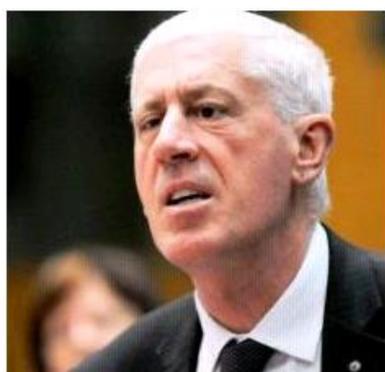
This year's Oration was presented by Dr Graeme Innes AM, lawyer, author and human rights practitioner. His oration will address the movement towards people with disabilities as agents of their own change, allied by members of the community towards a more inclusive world.

# 2018 LIBBY HARRICKS MEMORIAL ORATION

## “Sisters are doin’ it for themselves”

**Mr Graeme Innes AM**

---



"Now there was a time when we used to say  
That behind every great man there had to be a great woman  
Now in these times of change that is no longer true,  
So we're comin out of the kitchen Cos there's somethin we forgot to say to you  
Sisters are doin' it for themselves,  
Standin on their own two feet, and ringin on their own bell"

© RCA

One of the iconic songs of the women's movement, sung by Aretha Franklin and Annie Lennox from the Eurhythmics. Such a powerful message, and a song that is hard not to start tapping and singing along to.

I gave a great deal of thought to whether I should use those lyrics to begin this oration. Was I misappropriating a powerful statement of women to my own, and the disability cause? Or was I recognising a powerful rallying cry, and drawing important comparisons between the women's movement and the disability movement? Clearly I took the latter view. I believe that Libby Harricks, in honour of whom this oration is delivered each year, and may I say that it is a great honour for me to be chosen as one of those orators, would have shared my view. I knew and worked with Libby Harricks. She was a woman with a disability, who worked hard for the advancement of both movements. Though I don't share her gender, I share her passion for those two causes.

Talking of passion, I have a passion for stories also. So much so that I wrote my own story several years ago, but I have a wider passion for stories than just my own. I want to tell you three stories which are illustrative of the point I am seeking to draw from those powerful Aretha Franklin lyrics. That people with disabilities, just like women, are doin' it for themselves. Standin' on their own two feet, in the figurative sense in some cases, and ringin' on their own bells. Whilst we appreciate how members of society have cared for us in the past, times are changing, and what we are now demanding is empowerment, appropriate respect as part of society, and to play our role as equal and included members of that society. We will deliver our contribution, but you have to change your attitude towards us, so that our contribution is recognized, and society receives the full benefit of it.

First is the story of how one blind boy's determination led to a system of communication used throughout the world. Louis Braille was born in Coupvray, outside Paris in 1809. At the age of three, he was trying to make holes in a piece of leather with an awl in his father's workshop. The awl slipped across the tough leather and struck him in one of his eyes. He suffered for weeks as the wound became severely infected. The infection then spread to his other eye. By the age of five he was completely blind in both eyes. His parents made many efforts to raise their youngest child in a normal fashion, and he prospered in their care.

Because of his combination of intelligence and diligence, Braille was permitted to attend one of the first schools for blind children in the world, the Royal Institute for Blind Youth, since renamed to the National Institute for Blind Youth in Paris. The children attending the Institute were taught how to read by a system devised by the school's founder, Valentin Haüy. He designed and manufactured a small library of books for the children using a technique of embossing heavy paper with the raised imprints of Latin letters. Braille was helped by these books, but he also despaired over their lack of depth. They were very fragile, and expensive to obtain. When the school first opened, it had a total of three books. This number increased only very slowly. Nonetheless, Haüy promoted their use with zeal. To him, the books presented a system that would be readily approved by educators, and indeed they seemed — to the sighted — to offer the best achievable results.

For Braille and his schoolmates, however, they could detect all too well the books' major limitations.

Braille was determined to invent a system of reading and writing that could bridge the gap in communication between people who were sighted and people who were blind. He said: "Access to communication in the widest sense is access to knowledge, and that is vitally important for us if we [blind people] are not to go on being despised or patronized by condescending sighted people. We do not need pity, nor do we need to be reminded we are vulnerable. We must be treated as equals

— and communication is the way this can be brought about." (Braille, 1841, cited in Bikel, 1988, p. 259<sup>1</sup>) How far-sighted he was.

In 1821, Braille learned of a communication system devised by Captain Charles Barbier of the French Army, which was a code of dots and dashes impressed into thick paper. These impressions could be interpreted by the fingers, letting soldiers share information on the battlefield without having light, or needing to speak. The captain's code was too complex to use in its original military form, but it inspired Braille to develop a system of his own. Braille worked tirelessly on his ideas, and his new system was largely completed by 1824, when he was just fifteen years old.

Braille was a highly proficient student and, after he had exhausted the school's curriculum, he was asked to remain as a teacher's aide. By 1833, he was elevated to a full professorship. For much of the rest of his life, Braille stayed at the Institute where he taught history, geometry, and algebra. Although Braille was admired and respected by his pupils, his writing system was not taught at the Institute during his lifetime. The successors of Valentin Hauy showed no interest in altering the established methods of the school, and indeed, they were actively hostile to the use of braille. So much so, that when a headmaster at the school had a history book translated into braille, he was fired. Braille might have died a death at that point. Institutions resist change.

It was only through the overwhelming insistence of the blind pupils, that Braille's system was finally adopted by the Institute in 1854, two years after his death. The system spread throughout the French-speaking world, and braille was officially adopted by schools for the blind in the United States in 1916, and a universal braille code for English was formalized in 1932. New variations in braille technology continue to grow, including such innovations as refreshable braille displays, such as the one I am using. Almost two centuries after its invention, braille remains a system of incredible utility and importance to blind people.

My second story is that of Gallaudet University. Alice Cogswell was the inspiration to Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet for the creation of the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. At the age of two, Alice became ill with cerebral-spinal meningitis. She lost her hearing and later she lost her speech as well. At the time, deafness was viewed as equivalent to a mental illness, and it was believed that deaf people could not be taught. Gallaudet moved into the house next door to hers when she was nine years old. Gallaudet soon noticed Alice's deafness, and that she wasn't interacting with the other children. Intrigued, he decided to teach her to communicate through pictures and writing letters in the dirt.

He and Alice's father, Dr. Mason Cogswell, decided that a formal school would be best for her, but no such school existed in the United States. Gallaudet went to Europe for 15 months to study deaf education. Alice Cogswell and six other deaf students entered the school he formed, which became

---

<sup>1</sup> Bikel, L. (1988). *Triumph Over Darkness: The Life of Louis Braille*. Leicestershire, F.A.Thorpe.

the American School for the Deaf in April 1817. Gallaudet was principal until 1830. Gallaudet's son, Edward Miner Gallaudet, followed in his legacy, establishing Gallaudet University, in Washington DC, in 1857. It remains the only higher education institution in which all programs and services are designed to accommodate deaf and hard of hearing students.

The university continued. In the 1980s there was a significant protest at Gallaudet related to disability rights. This was the "Deaf President Now" protest by the Gallaudet students in March 1988.

The 8-day demonstration, occupation and lock-out of the school began when the Board of Trustees appointed a new hearing President, Elisabeth Zinser, over two Deaf rivals. The students' primary grievance was that the university, which was dedicated to the education of people who are Deaf, had never had a Deaf president, someone representative of them. Of the protesters' four demands, the main one was the resignation of the current president and the appointment of a Deaf president. The demonstration involved around 2,000 student and nonstudent participants. The protests took place on campus, in government buildings, and in the streets. In the end, all the students' demands were met and I. King Jordan was appointed the first Deaf President of the university. Jordan later famously said, "Deaf people can do anything hearing people can do, except hear."

My third story is of Edward Roberts and the disability rights movement. One of the most important developments of the disability rights movement was the growth of the independent living movement, which emerged in California in the 1960s through the efforts of Edward Roberts and other wheelchair-users. This movement, a subset of the disability rights movement, believes that people with disabilities are the experts about their needs, and therefore they must take the initiative, individually and collectively, in designing and promoting better solutions, and must organize themselves for political power. Ed contracted polio at the age of fourteen in 1953. He was paralyzed from the neck down except for two fingers on one hand, and several toes. He slept in an iron lung at night and often rested there during the day. When out of the lung he survived by "frog breathing," a technique for forcing air into the lungs using facial and neck muscles.

He attended school by telephone until his mother, Zona, insisted that he attend in person once a week for a few hours. At school, he faced his deep fear of being stared at, and so he transformed his sense of personal identity. He gave up thinking of himself as a "helpless cripple," and decided to think of himself as a "star." He credited his mother with teaching him by example how to fight for what he needed.

Ed Roberts is often called the father of the Independent Living movement. His career as an advocate began when a high school administrator threatened to deny him his diploma because he had not completed driver's education and physical education (which might have been a bit tricky for him to do in an iron lung). He was admitted to the University of California, Berkeley. He had to

fight for the support he needed to attend college from the California Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, because his rehabilitation counsellor thought he was too severely disabled to ever get a job. Upon learning that Roberts had a severe disability, one of the UC Berkeley deans famously commented, "We've tried cripples before and it didn't work." Probably the same sort of comments were made about the car, the computer and the mobile phone.

Roberts was admitted in 1962, two years before the Free Speech Movement transformed Berkeley into a hotbed of student protest. When his search for housing met resistance, in part because of the iron lung he slept in, the director of the campus health service offered him a room in an empty wing of the Cowell Hospital. Roberts accepted on the condition that the area where he lived be treated as dormitory space, not a medical facility. His admission broke the ice for other students with severe disabilities, who joined him over the next few years. The group developed a sense of identity and élan, and began to formulate a political analysis of disability. They began calling themselves the "Rolling Quads" to the surprise of some non-disabled observers who had never before heard a positive expression of disability identity. In 1968, when a rehabilitation counsellor threatened two of the Rolling Quads with eviction from the Cowell Residence, the group organized a successful 'revolt' that led to the counsellor's transfer.

Their success on campus inspired the group to begin advocating for curb cuts, opening access to the wider community, and to create the Physically Disabled Student's Program (PDSP)—the first student-led disability services program in the country. The need to serve the wider community led activists to create the Berkeley Center for Independent Living (CIL), the first independent living service and advocacy program run by and for people with disabilities.

In 1976, newly elected Governor Jerry Brown appointed Roberts Director of the California Department of Vocational Rehabilitation—the same agency that had once labelled him too severely disabled to work. He served in that post until 1983. Before the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was passed, Roberts realized that many of the buildings at UC Berkeley were not accessible to him or other wheelchair users. Disability rights activists wanted to end discrimination and have rights for people with disabilities that were mandated and protected by the law. Roberts and his peers demonstrated to enforce section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which stated that people with disabilities should not be excluded from activities, denied the right to receive benefits, or be discriminated against, from any program that uses federal financial assistance, solely because of their disability.

For 28 days, activists occupied the offices of the Carter Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare building located in San Francisco. The government staff refused to assist the protesters in any way. Other minority groups such as Black Panthers, the Butterfly Brigade, and an anti-gay-violence group supported the disability rights movement, and brought in food along with other materials to assist the protesters. Eventually, government officials agreed to a congressional hearing which was held

in the building. The testimonies of Ed Roberts along with other activists were so compelling that the representative from the Department of Health Education Welfare joined the sit-in.

After relentlessly fighting for their rights, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was signed into law and became fully implemented under President Nixon. This taught disability activists that they could shape the federal rulings in their favour. These acts of resistance were a contributing factor for passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. This law mandated that; (a) local, state, and federal governments and programs be accessible, (b) employers with more than 15 employees make "reasonable accommodations" for workers with disabilities and not discriminate against otherwise qualified workers with disabilities, (c) public accommodations such as restaurants and stores not discriminate against people with disabilities and (d) they make reasonable modifications to ensure access for members of the public with disabilities. The act also mandated access in public transportation, communication, and in other areas of public life.

So what is the golden thread which runs through those three different stories, happening at different times in different parts of the world? First it's about empowerment of people with disabilities. Braille empowered millions of blind people throughout the world by providing a script with which we could read and write. Importantly, it was introduced against the wishes of those who could see.

People who were deaf fought for the right to lead the university devoted to their education, and fought for its strengthening and continuation. Again, they were opposed, and again they united to ensure they achieved what they sought. Finally, Ed Roberts and his colleagues fought for the right to be viewed as people first, and have their disability considered second. They too used protest through a sit-in, and other disempowered groups in the community banded together to provide support. Sisters were doing it for themselves.

And it is sisters, too, of course. I could have just as easily told the story of Judy Human, who was part of the disability civil rights movement with Ed Roberts, who now spends her time working with the World Bank and on the international stage causing change. I could have talked about Rhonda Galbally, on the barricades with others in the streets of Melbourne opposing the use of beauty contests to raise money on behalf of people with cerebral palsy who would not be considered for such contests. I could have talked of Stella Young, taken too soon, who used powerful writing, oratory and humour to make her points about disability rights, including her disparagement of things such as special buses when she said "special is really just another way of saying pretty shit." Most relevantly, the story of Libby Harricks herself, who with great determination and dignity, advanced the cause of people who are deaf or have hearing impairment. I chose not to tell Libby's story here because I could not have improved on the way it has been told in a number of earlier orations.

But the golden thread of all of these stories is about more than empowerment. It is about you, members of the general community, who do not yet have a disability, and remember we are all just

an accident or illness away from a disability, walking with us on this journey of empowerment, rather than talking on our behalf, and holding us back. Pity is corrosive, and the time for just charity and care has passed.

I'm not criticizing charity and care. We all need them, as people with or without disabilities, at times in our lives. However, we, people with disabilities, want your recognition of our equality, and your inclusion of us in the general community. This requires you to change your attitude towards us, and behave in a way that reflects that attitude. Refer to us positively. Don't use language which diminishes and disempowers us. Don't talk about us being confined to a wheelchair, or suffering deafness.

Educate us inclusively, don't lock us away in special schools so we - unlike you - get little experience of community life until we are adults.

Recognise the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) as the piece of positive social infrastructure that it is, and lobby governments to provide it with certainty of funding and reduction of unnecessary bureaucracy so that it can properly do its job.

Build buildings and houses so that all community members can access them, not just those without disabilities and design products so that all of us can use them.

Provide captions when for movies and videos, write easy-to-read versions of complex documents. Don't follow the example of the Commonwealth bank and put 80 thousand Albert EFTPOS machines in the market with only a touchscreen, so that I and more than 300 thousand Australians who are blind or vision-impaired can no longer pay for services independently.

Don't talk about us without us, or on our behalf. Support and resource us to speak for ourselves.

And employ us, moving us from welfare beneficiaries to tax-paying contributors. Think about the percentage of people with disabilities who are employed in the organisations with which you are involved. Because you're not empowering us if you're not giving us jobs. Set targets of 15 percent of employees - the number of people with disabilities of working age in the general population - and develop strategies to reach those targets. Because if you're not giving us jobs you're not really including us.

We, people with disabilities, are doin' it for ourselves. We are on the journey that Louis Braille, Gallaudet students, Ed Roberts and the Rolling Quads, Judy Human, Rhonda Galbally, Stella Young, Libby Harricks, and I, as well as many others, commenced some years ago. But it would be an easier and more powerful journey if you changed your attitude towards us, stopped pitying and started empowering, treated us the same way as you do able-bodied members of the community, and came on the journey with us.