

## A Series on Families Living With Tinnitus

*We often have little influence on a loved one's chronic condition. However, we can learn about the issues, remain supportive and take care of our own well-being. For some, working to enhance treatments, find cures and raise awareness helps them deal with their own condition and begin to see a more positive future. This is certainly true of the tinnitus community*

*This is the fifth story in our series on families made up of members with and without tinnitus. The series explores their experiences, the feelings that penetrate their lives and the frustrations they face. It also illuminates some of the solutions that diminish their stress and allow them to settle into a "new normal."*



# The Value of a Support System

KATIE FULLER, ATA MANAGER OF MEMBER & SUPPORT RELATIONS

The staff met Meredith Wilhelmi at the June 2010 **Jack Vernon Walk to Silence Tinnitus**, held near ATA's headquarters in Portland, Ore. But she didn't come alone – she brought her support system, the group of people who have helped her deal with her tinnitus and hyperacusis from the very beginning. This includes Gary and Melinda, Meredith's parents; her younger sister, Heather; her friend Matt; her boyfriend, Cam; and her three dogs. Meredith's story demonstrates how tinnitus changed her life and how these important people helped make it all bearable.

## How Quickly Life Can Change

In January 2010, Meredith developed tinnitus from using the acne medication Accutane®. Although tinnitus was listed as a common side effect, she had no idea what that meant. Unfortunately, within four months she learned just what tinnitus was. The ringing was constant and intolerable; she immediately found herself in a state of panic and hysteria. Meredith also acquired a sudden onset of hyperacusis.

Insomnia set in and Meredith's anxiety increased. As a deputy sheriff, working as a corrections officer, she found going to work agonizing; blaring radios, inmates yelling, doors slamming and practicing at the shooting range became intolerable. She became unsure whether she was going to be able to continue her line of work. "I felt like dying. I went from being a professional who helped individuals on the edge, to being on the edge myself," Meredith remembers.



*Meredith at the 2010 Jack Vernon Walk to Silence Tinnitus*



*Meredith's support system: her friend Matt; her parents, Melinda and Gary; her sister, Heather; Meredith; and her boyfriend, Cam.*

“Meredith having tinnitus has brought our family closer; we have all realized the importance of being there for each other during hard times. With Meredith living so far away, it’s physically difficult to be there, but the constant phone calls and e-mails have tightened our family bond.”

Melinda Wilhelmi  
Meredith’s mother

## The Value of Her Support System: Priceless

Meredith searched for a doctor who could offer her any shred of hope. She and her family scoured every website they could find related to tinnitus and hyperacusis. She became a member of ATA and joined our Facebook social network. “Although I wouldn’t wish this condition on anyone, it was a comfort to have people to talk to who were suffering just as I was,” says Meredith.

She feels that her boyfriend, parents and sister have been the most supportive individuals since her tinnitus and hyperacusis began. They always answer her phone calls and are there to talk her through every stressed out and worried moment. They accompany her to doctor appointments for moral support and send care packages with flowers and chocolate to brighten her dark days. Meredith’s loved ones saw how she was suffering and the negative effect tinnitus and hyperacusis were having on her life, so they all accompanied her to ATA’s **Jack Vernon Walk to Silence Tinnitus**, donating their time and money to help promote tinnitus research. Melinda, her mom, says that Meredith’s tinnitus has brought their family closer together because they realize the importance of being there for each other during hard times.

## Adjusting to a New Kind of Everyday Life

Meredith says she has been fortunate to experience a level of tinnitus that stays fairly low in the background during the day, and her sound sensitivity has improved somewhat. However, she is saddened that

activities she used to enjoy, like concerts and nights out dancing, are no longer an option. Cam agrees, but says it’s all about getting more creative and replacing loud activities with quieter ones.

Meredith has found several things that help her manage her tinnitus – a sound-generating pillow, pink noise CDs, a fan for background noise and the prescribed anxiety and/or sleep medications she keeps on hand for when her tinnitus flares up. She also enjoys spending more time out in nature, being with her pets and reconnecting with her spirituality.

She always carries special musicians’ earplugs, which help to lower sound volume levels that enter her ears but still allow her to hear conversation. When she is required to attend firearms training at work, she doubles her ear protection by coupling earplugs and the highest-rated decibel reduction earmuffs she can find.

## Meredith Finds ATA Very Reassuring

Meredith has found that with time she has acclimated somewhat to the sound of her tinnitus, although she still worries daily that it will progress and worsen with time. She appreciates ATA’s genuine and sincere efforts to battle “this curse that is tinnitus” and supports the organization because it is an established, prominent group with caring staff and volunteers who work tirelessly to find a cure.

“When we start to feel that there may never be a cure,” says Meredith, “ATA provides reassuring research updates. They are a motivated, creative group that has the ability to bring substantial awareness to a society that is generally unaware of this common, yet often ignored, debilitating condition.” ☺☺