

50¢

THE WESTSIDER

SINCE
1972

Helping Others Hear the World

Through her own medical problems, Semel found a cause

BY ALINE REYNOLDS

Chelsea resident Ellen Semel has turned a personal health problem into something positive. Having bravely confronted life-long hearing loss, Semel felt the need to lend a hand to others afflicted with the same condition. She gained resolve to manage her disability after joining the Hearing Loss Association of America in 2000 and soon after became head of the association's planning committee. Last year, she was appointed chief organizer of the association's first-ever New York City Walk4Hearing event on Sunday, Oct. 19 in Riverside Park. The event aims to raise awareness of hearing disabilities.

Semel, 65, was diagnosed with mild hearing loss in her left ear as an elementary school student in Brooklyn. Later on, her mother and a doctor speculated that her condition was a result of a fall she had as an infant. This somewhat mysterious injury, however, had little impact on her youth.

Things began to spiral downward when, in her mid-40s, Semel gradually underwent dramatic hearing loss in her right ear.

Toward the end of her 10-year career at a New York City television network, where she worked in the publicity and legal departments, Semel began having trouble with phone conversations and hearing television and radio shows. Admitting that she had a problem was one of her greatest challenges.

"I was in denial," she said. Semel left the media world in 1989 to become an assistant in a New York City law firm. This was when she was diagnosed with moderate sensory neural hearing loss in both ears. But, since her work was mainly computer-based, it involved minimal verbal interaction with others, enabling her to maintain the job for 10 years.

Doctors still didn't have a definitive explanation for her health problem, but suggested that it stemmed from a respiratory viral infection she had in her early 40s.

Seeking a position that in-

“Semel has come a long way in combating her difficulties with hearing. New cognitive strategies and improved hearing equipment have helped her retain a satisfying job for four years.”

involved more administrative duties, Semel left her first legal assistant position to work for another New York law firm in 1999. By now, however, her medical condition had worsened and was interfering with her daily activities. Experiencing 70 percent hearing loss in her right ear and 50 percent in her left, she was at that point diagnosed with severe sensorineural hearing loss.

"It was very anxiety provoking because I suddenly couldn't deal in these fast-paced environ-

ments," she said of the high-pressure work setting. "People are coming behind you to talk to you when you don't even know they're there."

Due to problems in conversations with attorneys, Semel was forced to resign in 2002. "They were not willing to accept having someone in that position who couldn't communicate well, but no company can explicitly fire someone because of a disability," she said. "It was a tough situation."

A typically well-liked employee in the past, Semel felt like a "total wreck" when asked to leave the firm. Though the firm offered her severance pay, she was not eligible for federal disability benefits while seeking new employment.

Between jobs, Semel managed to stay afloat financially by working as a freelance editor and proofreader for graduate students in the New York area.

But after losing two more administrative jobs over the next year and a half, Semel became truly discouraged.

"I was very, very depressed. I felt like I could no longer work," she said.

She was not ready, however, to surrender to her ailment. In early 2004, Semel finally mustered the courage to attend a disability job fair, where an advisor vigorously encouraged her to seek new employment.

In September 2004, she was hired to work as a personal assistant to a philanthropist in Manhattan.

"It's the perfect job for me, since it's not heavily oral, and I get to work on my own a lot of the time," she said of her current job.



Andrew Schwartz

Ellen Semel is spearheading the first-ever New York City Walk4Hearing event on Sunday, Oct. 19.

As the leader of the 2008 New York City Walk4Hearing event, Semel is responsible for coordinating, fundraising for and publicizing the walk. She describes the experience as "very daunting, yet gratifying."

"Ellen's determination, commitment and passion, fueled by her personal struggles with hearing loss, is putting this cause on the map," said Marilyn Ratner, a member of the Walk4Hearing Committee.

Semel has come a long way in combating her difficulties with hearing. New cognitive strategies and improved hearing equipment have helped her retain a

satisfying job for four years. But more importantly, eight years with the Hearing Loss Association of America have allowed her to come to terms with her disability, with which she now confidently copes.

"I've learned how to manage my hearing loss," she said, "and how to look out for myself." ☞

Walk4Hearing 5K

Sunday, Oct. 19
Riverside Park at
West 83rd Street
Registration at 9 a.m.,
walk starts at 10 a.m.

For more information, visit
www.walk4hearing.org