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Three women let their passions take the lead when they started charities at midlife

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A teenager's life is one of nuance: whispered confidences and snide asides, fast talk in football huddles and insults muttered under a kid's breath. If your hearing isn't 100 percent, you're likely to miss half the communication that's swirling around you.

That was Kathlyn Maguire's reality.

"I started losing my hearing in my teens," said the West Palm Beach single. "I didn't believe there was anything wrong." Until one night at a sleepover. "I was confused about the chitchat. Basically, I couldn't hear once the lights were out."

That night, her friends told her she said "what?" a lot and "missed stuff." Faced with their honesty, Kathlyn went into instant denial.

"I became a lip reader without even realizing it," she said. "In my PR busi-

ness in New York, I always worked double-time to get the job done."

It wasn't until 2004, after decades of compensation, isolation and depression, that she started Empowerment Through Hearing as a grass-roots campaign from her home "so that no one has to suffer the stigma I felt." (She received 501(c)3 status as a nonprofit in 2007.)

Audrey Gruss traveled a similarly emotional route to found the Hope for Depression Research Foundation two years ago, in honor of her mother, Hope.

"My mother had her first major depression when I was a teenager, and I didn't understand it," said Audrey, a Palm Beach resident since 1995. "We were very frightened by seeing our mother so ill and non-communicative. I think my father called 911. You feel helpless and don't know what to do."

What followed were decades of misdiagnoses, numerous experiments with medication and its troublesome side effects, much psychic pain and the life-sapping loss of energy so common with clinical depression.

"When my mother passed away in December 2005, I had an epiphany moment when I decided to focus all my energies on finding better diagnoses and treatment," said Audrey. "If I couldn't help cure my mother of this emotional imbalance in her lifetime, I am committed to do everything in my power to find answers in my lifetime."

Just a few months later, Audrey, an expert fund-raiser who'd chaired most major Palm Beach balls, took those skills and combined them with her business and science background to become executive director of her own foundation.

Another Palm Beach woman who's successfully channeling her

energy into a charitable organization she founded is Suzanne Wright. The mother of three was so excited when her first grandson, Christian, arrived in 2001. But when he stopped speaking, stopped communicating, regressed in his potty training and starting getting up in the night and wandering, she knew something was wrong. It took months to get the diagnosis: autism.

"I stood in that room with the team of doctors at Columbia and I was horrified," she said. "Autism? That's Rain Man", I thought. Then I found out that it affected 1 in 104 boys and 1 in 166 kids! I wanted to know why those doctors hadn't gotten the country up in arms that this is happening to a whole generation of children.

"I vividly remember how scared of polio everyone was when I was growing up in the Bronx and Queens. We were all frightened to death of that epidemic and it galvanized this country to find a cause and cure."

Suzanne felt the alarm needed to be sounded again, so she went to her husband Bob, the chairman of NBC, and said, "There's a story here."

A weeklong series eventually launched on The Today Show, and though awareness is up, Suzanne says the epidemic has spread: Last year, the numbers of those affected climbed to 1 in 98 boys and 1 in 150 children.

"Christian was kidnapped by autism," she insists. "In a period of two months, he was gone and we haven't seen him again. He sunk to the depths of autism."

Suzanne likens the experience to losing a child, and said her family grieved for six months. Before she and Bob co-founded Autism Speaks in 2005, her daughter and son-in-law had to agree to "go public" with their family's story.

Once they did, Autism Speaks launched with a bang. Already it's the nation's top funder of autism research, having committed \$30 million in new research funding in 2007.

Committed to a cause

Three dynamic women, all in their 60s, all passionately committed to their respective causes. In the past three years, each has been personally motivated to found a charity.



Kathlyn Maguire

Though they brought varying levels of financial support and expertise to the table, all are successful.

"Anybody can do this with whatever level of experience they have," Audrey said. "You can start a foundation with friends donating money, with your own money or with outside consultants who advise you. The philanthropy departments of banks can help you, so can Foundation Source (which offers support services for private foundations). People have started these from scratch with no experience, but their passion makes it successful."

Audrey believes the personal touch elevates an organization's ability to succeed.

"Whatever cause has impacted you, whatever is truly meaningful to you, let it become your passion," she said. "If there's a personal story behind your cause, it gives you more impact and allows you to work from both your heart and your brain. That is a dynamite combination!"

And one that has worked for all three women. Despite heartache, each has found a measure of triumph by giving back.

They've learned that good works can flourish, even when the motivation is born from pain.

"Difficulties can bring the most positive things to life," Audrey said. "Watching my mother go through depression was one of the most difficult and negatively charged things in my life - and yet it has become the most positive thing I can do with my life, my capabilities and my resources today."

Empowerment Through Hearing

Founder and Chairman:
Kathlyn Maguire

Goal: To position hearing loss as common and preventable. For 2009, Kathlyn's goal for ETH is to introduce Listen Up! into classrooms nationwide.

History: Started as a grass-roots campaign in 2004 from Maguire's home in West Palm Beach; became a not-for-profit in 2007. She continues to fund the organization herself and raise money as well. Latest project is Listen Up, a colorful workbook aimed at teens. It will be incorporated this fall into the curriculum of Palm Beach County schools.

Original benefactor:
Kathlyn Maguire

Seed money: Low 6 figures.

Why do this? To bring hearing loss out of the closet. Shockingly, 80 percent of those diagnosed with hearing loss don't seek further treatment. "I don't want them to suffer like I did," says Maguire, who didn't try a hearing aid until she was 40. (Her 2001 cochlear implant changed her life, she says, and allowed her to reach out through ETH.)

What others can do to help: Be proactive. Turn down the sound. Wear earplugs to concerts. And speak up to a teen you think might heed your words about hearing damage. Spread the word on how common this is. (One in 10 students has some degree of hearing loss.)

Information: hearingconnection.org
listenupkids.com

Hope for Depression Research Foundation

Founder and Chairman:
Audrey Gruss

Goal: To cure depression and related disorders - anxiety, bipolar disorder, postpartum depression, prolonged grief and post-traumatic stress syndrome.

History: Founded in April 2006. HDRF sets itself apart by funding pioneering research that integrates the fields of neuroscience with psychology. In the last two years, the foundation has distributed more than \$5 million in research grants and endowments.

Original benefactor: Audrey's husband, former polo player and philanthropist Martin Gruss.

Seed money: \$25 million

Why do this? "Because I discovered the staggering reality that in the 20 years since the introduction of Prozac and the other SSRI anti-depressant medications, there has been no change in the basic treatment of depression, just adjustments in the use of existing approaches."

What can others do to help? Support the foundation, where 100 percent of any dollar donated goes directly to research. (Every other administrative expense is funded by the Audrey and Martin Gruss Foundation.) "We're obligated to raise funds from the public; it can't just be me supporting a foundation," Audrey said. "Today, \$25 million doesn't go very far. Everybody in America is touched directly or indirectly by depression."

Information: (212) 446-4235 or
hopefordpression.org

Autism Speaks

Founder and Chairman:
Suzanne Wright, co-founder,
with husband Bob

Goal: To change the future for all who struggle with autism spectrum disorders. Toward that end, they fund global biomedical research into the causes, prevention, treatments and cure for autism and raise public awareness about autism and its effects.

History: Founded in February 2005 and now the nation's leading nonprofit organization devoted to autism.

Original benefactor: \$25 million came from Bernie Marcus, founder of Home Depot

Seed money: \$35 million

Why do this? Because Suzanne's first grandchild, Christian, was diagnosed autistic in March 2004. And because she sees this happening around the globe and wants to get the world's attention.

What can others do to help?

Participate in the local walks to raise money for autism research. World Autism Awareness Day is April 2, and many are scheduled around that time. "Have baseball games, car washes, you name it," suggests Suzanne. "Go online and gain some awareness of what's going on. If you see a child throwing a tantrum in a grocery store, people's eyes just roll back in their head, but have some compassion because that child could have autism."

Information: www.autismspeaks.org