



Lori Frisher

Lori Frisher, who bravely volunteered to share her story as our second Lotus Ladies Personal Profile, is the embodiment of one of the core values of Lotus Network: **It is never too late to become the person you always wanted to be.** We hope that her story will inspire you to share your own story or nominate someone else whose story deserves to be heard...we believe they all do!

The Power of Listening

In March of 2020, just as the world was beginning to reckon with the Covid-19 outbreak, Lori Frisher realized something was very wrong. She had chills, fatigue, muscle aches...all symptoms of the frightening new illness that was bringing life as we knew it to a grinding halt. Repeated test results for the virus came back negative, but Lori had her doubts. What else could be making her feel so debilitated? As the weeks of unexplained illness dragged on, Lori lost her voice, making it even harder to get clear answers from the doctors whose muffled words and concealed lips, hidden behind the opaque masks that had become ubiquitous, made communication all but impossible. For a person with hearing loss who had nevertheless built a career based on interpersonal connections, this was an especially crushing blow.

Born with moderate to severe hearing loss and diagnosed as a toddler, Lori worked hard throughout her school years to compensate. She relied on hearing aids and lip reading, an imperfect solution that kept her locked out of family conversations in the car, guessing at what friends found funny at parties, and relying on note takers and tutors to help her understand her teacher in class.

Lori never wanted to draw attention to her disability; she just wanted to fit in and get on with her life. She wore her long auburn hair loose, concealing the devices she relied on to gain some limited access to the hearing world. She learned to read social cues and developed a broad friendship network. She excelled at sports. Unable to hear the whoosh of a soccer ball landing in the net, the smack of a tennis ball connecting with a racket, or the cheers from the spectators, she could still revel in the smiles of her teammates when she helped bring them to victory. She made it to the University of Hartford, where she played Division I tennis as a walk-on and was later chosen by her peers to deliver a commencement address.

It was during that speech that Lori first outwardly acknowledged what she had worked so hard to overcome. Speaking about her hearing impairment in public was not easy, but it was important to Lori to thank the school community for the support she had received as a student athlete. As her fellow students rose for a standing ovation, she felt her confidence swell. Lori moved to NYC and went on to a corporate career in advertising and sales, using the listening skills she had carefully honed to build relationships with her clients, all the while advocating in the media for people in the disability community, work that eventually brought her to Denver.

Throughout this time, life never stopped throwing curve balls. Lori battled cancer twice, the second occurrence requiring a regimen of chemo treatment that further diminished her already limited hearing. There was, however, a silver lining: Lori's hearing loss made her finally eligible to receive a cochlear implant. Four years later, she had the good fortune of becoming the first person in the world to be implanted with both the cochlear implant and new cutting edge hearing technology: the Esteem hearing implant, an invisible hearing device with a lifespan of 10 years that improves the eardrum's ability to process and amplify sound. For Lori, the transformation was miraculous. Sounds that she had never before heard became a part of her daily reality – her dog panting, the drip of water running off her hair in the shower, the low hum of a printer in the next room, rain on the roof of her car, the sound of a kiss.

As her hearing improved, Lori began to contemplate making other changes. She had long felt stifled in corporate America; what she wanted was a business of her own, one that centered on meaningful rather than transactional relationships. She began to think of how she could harness her unique skill set. Lori had worked for years with her family in the New York hospitality and gifts industry. She knew how to sell with passion. She knew how to listen deeply and communicate in unexpected ways. Her background and her desire to give back all came together in 2019, when she launched Top Shelf Baskets, an entrepreneurial venture seeking to move beyond "gratuitous" gift giving to something far more collaborative, creative, and memorable. The customized storytelling baskets might include a hologram coffee table book on African wildlife for a first time home buyer whose trip of a lifetime had taken her to the continent, a classic Life Magazine featuring Diana Ross and a curated sampling of Motown records for music lovers from Five Points, or a Greek evil eye imported directly from Greece as part of an over-the-top basket to serve as an invitation for an adventure to the islands. Each vessel – which could be anything from a replica kitchen sink to a vintage pickup truck to an antique suitcase – was carefully chosen to create a personalized gift that truly told a story. The business was just taking off when, following the scheduled replacement of the Esteem implant with an improved cochlear implant, Lori fell ill and her exciting new business had to be set aside.

A year has passed since then and Lori, who was eventually diagnosed with FND (Functional Neurological Disorder), has recovered her voice and is regaining her strength. Lori tries to look at everything as a gift, no matter how hard it is, and this experience was no exception. It forced her to slow down and look within, which gave her a newfound appreciation for the tremendous support she has from her family, friends, and of course, her beloved dog. She still has mountains in front of her – she will soon have another hearing implant surgery that will leave her with no hearing in one ear for several months – but she is determined to keep moving forward. "People need to see people like myself take things to greater heights," she says. Both in her advocacy for the disability community and the growing business she can't wait to get back to, Lori is ready to climb.

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