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# Highland Park

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*Dr. Ronna Fisher*  
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# Dr. Ronna Fisher: Restoring Connections Through Hearing Health

*By Dr. Ronna Fisher and Paul Clements*

*Photos by Elijah Litscher | The Loop Marketing  
and courtesy of Dr. Ronna Fisher*

In Chicago's vibrant medical landscape, few professionals command the level of respect and admiration given to Dr. Ronna Fisher, an audiologist and founder of Hearing Health Center. With credentials including a Doctor of Audiology degree and fellowship in the American Academy of Audiology, Fisher has dedicated more than 40 years to advancing the field of audiology and transforming lives throughout the Chicagoland area. As a self-taught entrepreneur and trailblazer, she has built a trusted legacy through her practice, which now operates five locations. In a recent interview, Fisher shared insights into her journey, emphasizing how personal loss and pioneering vision have driven her to restore human connections through improved hearing.

Fisher's entry into audiology stemmed from a blend of chance and profound personal connection. Raised in Pittsburgh, she discovered the field through a roommate in Atlanta who was studying audiology at Emory University. "She was in graduate school at Emory for audiology. I had never heard of an audiologist before—almost no one did," Fisher recalled. The profession was still emerging, born after World War II to treat the prevalence of noise-induced hearing loss in returning veterans.

A deeper drive came from her father's severe hearing impairment, caused by childhood rheumatic fever which gradually isolated him from loved ones. "His hearing didn't just affect him," Fisher remembered. "It affected everyone who loved him." He died at age 53 during heart surgery, before she could help. "That silence, both literal and lasting, became my driving force behind Hearing Health Center," she explained, noting it inspired the practice's founding in 1984 as a tribute to restoring vital connections that hearing makes possible.

Fisher earned her master's degree in audiology from the University of Pittsburgh and began her career unconventionally, working for a hearing aid dealer. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's ethics code barred audiologists from selling devices. "You met someone once or twice, recommended hearing aids, and sent them to a hearing aid dispenser. You never knew what happened after that," she said. "I hated that about



audiology." The role fostered patient relationships but led to professional isolation and denial of her certification.

When the association revised its code, Fisher's dual expertise in clinical and business aspects made her uniquely qualified and desirable. Job offers followed, including one in Chicago. "When my mother said, 'You know, Ronna, it's the unmarried daughter who has to take care of the mother,' I moved to Chicago," she recounted. There, she streamlined the referral system and became the first U.S. audiologist to secure a direct insurance contract.

After her employer sold the business, support from colleagues and patient A.N. "Abe" Pritzker—founder of the Hyatt hotel chain—enabled her to launch Hearing Health Center. Despite no business background, she seized the chance. Expansion soon followed: She and a colleague won a bid to open Edward Hospital's audiology department in Naperville. "I didn't realize Naperville was so far away. I thought I'd need to apply for a visa to get there," Fisher joked, marking her first hires to manage dual sites.

As her career advanced, Fisher's personal life blossomed. After marrying and welcoming daughter Meghan, she moved to Highland Park, where son Garrett was born in their enduring family home. "Highland Park was another world to me," she recalled. "I was pregnant, had no friends, and no clue how to get to work every day. The first time I took the train to Chicago, I asked the conductor where the dining car was. He looked at me like I was deranged and said, 'Where do you think you are, ma'am?'"

Balancing family and ambition, Fisher pursued the newly introduced Doctor of Audiology degree, becoming one of the nation's first recipients. "It wasn't easy," she admitted. "I had two small children, worked full time and took classes and studied at night." This forward-thinking step, now the industry standard, mirrored her innovative path.

Eager to serve her new community, Fisher targeted the North Shore. "After moving to Highland Park, I knew I wanted to help the people here," she said. "The problem was that a prominent audiologist made it abundantly clear I wasn't wanted or needed. Much to his chagrin, I did it anyway." Partnering with

a concierge physician for space, she started modestly, but demand exploded within three years.

In 2014, Fisher boldly relocated to Highland Park's Crossroads Shopping Center, next to Max's Deli. "I was scared," she confessed. "All my other offices were in medical buildings. This was my first foray into a shopping center." She was surprised by the number of people that just stopped in. "I realized that most people don't know where to go or who to see when they have difficulty hearing," she said. The move boosted accessibility and community integration. Her team dove in, offering talks at senior centers, partnering with the Park District, providing earplugs for the high school band, and supporting the local Alzheimer's Association.

Recognizing that affordability was one of the barriers to accessing hearing care, Fisher founded the Fisher Foundation for Hearing Health Care to bridge this gap. "Everyone deserves to experience the fullness of life," she stated. "The sounds of life and the voices of the people you love are too precious to ever miss." Early Hike for Hearing events, backed by manufacturers and celebrities, funded hearing services and hearing aids for children and adults.

Later, with a director's guidance, the foundation focused on children with brain cancer whose treatments caused hearing loss. "Doctors are proud they saved a child's life," Fisher explained, "but when the child goes home, they can't hear their teachers, siblings, or friends. They fell behind in school and were isolated. The families are already in debt and can't afford the cost of hearing treatment." She cherishes the memory of Riley, their first recipient, who heard his mother's voice after nearly three years. "Everyone was sobbing," Fisher recollected. Such stories highlight the foundation's inspirational impact, turning medical triumphs into full recoveries.

Today, with five Chicagoland locations, Hearing Health Center embodies Fisher's view that care restores dignity and connection. "I'll do anything and try everything if I think it might help someone hear better," she affirmed. Her leadership pioneered national firsts: completely-in-the-canal aid, digital technology in Chicago, and early adoption of Lyric (the only hearing aid worn 24/7 for months at a time). "What's the worst that can happen if it doesn't work? I'm not going to kill anyone! But if it does work, it could change a life—or many lives."

Fisher's unique style of ownership ensures accountability and quality care. Her team trains for months before patient contact. "I hire for my core values," she explained:



- Do what you say. Keep your promises. Failure to do so is grounds for termination.
- Integrity. What are you doing when no one is looking?
- A hunger to learn and grow. Anyone who thinks they know everything is not a good fit for our practice.
- Passion. I can teach skills, but I can't teach innate desire and enthusiasm.
- Willingness to change. I'm all about experimenting and trying new ways to do things. I go crazy when I hear, 'but that's the way we always did it.'
- Go above and beyond for every patient.

Hearing Health Center stands out by partnering with all major manufacturers—Phonak, Oticon, Widex, Signia, Starkey, and Resound—avoiding exclusive contracts. "Every patient is unique," Fisher emphasized. "Every brain is different. Needs and lifestyles are not the same for everyone. Sound is personal. I like rock and roll, you like opera. I want to be able to get the best hearing aid and offer the right solution for you. It's not one-size fits all." Aids require ongoing care: "Hearing aids live in a sweaty, oily, waxy environment and need deep cleaning every six months," she explained. "Your hearing ability needs to be monitored regularly. If your prescription changes, your hearing aids need reprogramming, adjustments, and fine-tuning. You want a provider who truly knows you and who cares about you."

Education is central, with her team teaching the hearing-brain link. "We don't hear with our ears—we hear with our brains," Fisher clarified. Untreated loss leads to memory issues, cognitive decline, and brain shrinkage. Notably, 83% of those over seventy with dementia have untreated hearing loss. Per the Alzheimer's Association, early treatment can prevent and delay dementia. "Most people wait too long," she cautioned. "By the time they see me, permanent damage has already occurred. I can't fix your brain."

Premium aids cost about \$5,000 per pair. They are unavailable at big-box stores. "Big-box stores are warehouses that purchase in bulk—including hearing aids," Fisher declared. "You get whatever they got a deal on last month. Warehouses are where you go to buy toilet paper and tires—you don't entrust your brain to a warehouse." Success relies on expertise: "Hearing aids are basically a piece of plastic. They're only as good as the expertise behind them, the ability to program, fine-tune, and troubleshoot with skill and creativity. Is it the kidney that saved your life or the surgeon that performed the operation?"

Denial often trumps cost as a barrier. "No one ever wants to come see me," Fisher observed. "I'm in a helping profession where most people don't think they need help, don't want help—and they certainly don't want to pay for something they can't show off." Patients' average age has dropped to mid-sixties. "Baby boomers destroyed their hearing at concerts, bars, and deafening recreational activities," she asserted. "Every concert can age your ears by up to two years. The results? Cumulative, permanent, and irreversible damage."

Despite the decrease in age, stigma still exists, linking hearing loss to aging or weakness, fueling denial. "Hearing declines slowly," Fisher explained. "It's obvious when you can't read the menu. But you don't know the day the turn signal disappeared or realize that the TV is too loud for everyone else." Common excuses:

- I hear fine, she mumbles.
- My hearing isn't that bad, it's just noisy in here.
- The TV isn't that loud; it's the sound quality.
- He has a really soft voice.

Untreated loss reshapes life, eroding confidence and independence. Family notices first, where attempts at discussion elicit denial and resistance. Tensions rise as family and friends become irritated by constant requests for repetition and a blaring TV.

"Relationships are built on communication," Fisher emphasized. "As hearing problems worsen, communication decreases and relationships deteriorate." She shared a couple's story: The husband denied issues; his wife cried, "I feel like he's always ignoring me. We don't talk anymore, and when we do, we argue. We don't go out with our friends, or to movies. If I talk louder so he can hear me, he yells at me for screaming. I can't whisper or tell him a joke. There's no spontaneity or intimacy anymore."

Cognitively, "the brain is working so hard just to listen intently and interpret what's being said, that it reduces the capacity for memory, focus, and other cognitive tasks,"



Fisher noted. "It's exhausting straining all the time to hear. By the end of the day, you're cranky, short-tempered, and don't want to interact with anyone."

Safety risks not only include missing important phone calls, or alarms. Untreated hearing loss triples the risk of falling by damaging the balance system. Early treatment restores confidence, strengthens ties, and can reverse cognitive decline. "Hearing health is not just about sound, it's about staying connected to life," Fisher stressed.

Denial delays care, but not for all. Legendary rock star Roger Daltrey of The Who, a loyal patient, credits Fisher for sustaining his career despite profound hearing loss from decades of noise exposure. "Dr. Ronna Fisher at Hearing Health Center is the only person I trust with my hearing," Daltrey has said. "[She] let me keep doing what I love!"

At a recent Ravinia Festival concert in Highland Park, Daltrey paused to reflect on his life, praising his hearing aids. He explained that, essentially deaf from years of loud performances, he now adjusts them as needed: turning them up to hear clearly or down for quiet. It emerged that he had visited Fisher that day, underscoring her role in enabling his ongoing high-level work.

In a volume-driven industry, Fisher exemplifies purposeful leadership. Her path, fueled by passion and integrity, has made Hearing Health Center a patient sanctuary. Balancing career with raising Meghan and Garrett, she maintains grace. After four decades, five sites, and countless patient transformations, her impact endures: Dr. Ronna Fisher not only improves hearing but changes lives.



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