

LEE WOODRUFF TALKS WITH ASHA

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Narrator: Welcome to ASHA Network News, a continuing series that highlights issues of interest to ASHA members.

Facilitator: Today's guest is Lee Woodruff, one half of the husband and wife team of Bob and Lee Woodruff. As many people know, Bob was severely injured in a January 2006 bomb blast as he covered the Iraq War as anchor of ABC's World News Tonight. What not as many people may know is that the Woodruff's have written a book about the experience. "In an Instant" is the title. And they will be honored at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's 2007 Convention with ASHA's Annie Glenn Award. Since Bob's injury, Lee and Bob have been very public, not only about their own experiences, but also on behalf of our military, who have suffered traumatic brain injury in action. Lee Woodruff, thank you for joining us today.

Lee Woodruff: It's a pleasure to be here.

Facilitator: Well, I guess for openers, I would ask what does it mean to be winning an award from a group like ASHA, especially an honor that is associated with Annie and John Glenn?

Lee Woodruff: It's a huge honor. As long as I have been a parent of a hearing impaired child, I've been aware of ASHA. And I think of it as one of those fulcrum organizations that's providing a voice and is an advocate for those with hearing impairments. So to be able to get the Annie Glenn award and to know what she has been to the hearing impaired community, it's a really amazing award.

Facilitator: Well, it's been, I know, quite a year for you and Bob, going public with your story and speaking out about what you've been through and speaking out on behalf of our military. Could you talk about what that experience has been like, looking back on the last year?

Lee Woodruff: You know, it's been an honor. I mean, obviously, the first part of that year was terrifying, not really knowing the extent of Bob's injuries. And then, as he recovered, just watching the grueling, slow way that brain recovers and comes back to itself. So there was a lot of uncertainty. But even from the very beginning, when Bob woke up, we realized that we were a lucky family, far luckier than so many of the other military families. And, I think, to be able to put a face on these injuries and the nature of a brain injury, and all the things that that entails, has really been an honor as well in terms of being able to give back and feel lucky in so many ways. And also, you know, you get sort of that 15 minutes of

fame, you sometimes have something thrust on you that didn't expect. And so I think it's kind of incumbent on you to either take it two ways. You can do something positive with it, and turn it into a positive experience, and model that for your children. Or you could probably fold your tent and just kind of handle it really privately, which isn't a wrong way to do it. But I think we chose, with the spotlight on us, to try to do something that could do some good for so many of these men because we had seen them, being in the military hospitals.

Facilitator: Is there a particular story or experience that sticks in your mind as you've gone public with your story and gone around the country and talked in situations like we're talking today? Is there anything that, really, you recall as having a great impact on you?

Lee Woodruff: There are so many stories surrounding this journey, but I think that the one that I want to relay to you today is one that does have to do with Nora, who is our hearing-impaired child. And it was really a year after Bob's injury, a year to the day, January 29, 2007. And I had told my older children that it was the anniversary of Dad's injury because I knew that it would be on the news that night.

Facilitator: Right.

Lee Woodruff: And I had made a decision not to tell the younger -- the twins, who were six at the time. And they must have heard me on the phone that day because as I was tucking them into bed, my little Nora started to cry. And I said, you know, "What's wrong?" And she said, "I'm so sad about Daddy." And I said, "Well, why are you sad? Dad's doing so well." And she said, "Well, his back has all those scars, and his face has scarring on it, and his hair sticks straight up. And he doesn't always have all the words." And I said, "Well, Nora, he's really getting the words. A lot of that is coming back." And she said, "Well, you know, I think this Daddy loves me even more." And I thought if that's the way my kids have processed this, if that's the way we've all come through this as a family --

Facilitator: Right.

Lee Woodruff: -- Then I think we're probably doing okay as survivors.

Facilitator: Wow. Well, given what Bob has been through, and given what you've faced with your child, I'm wondering what does it mean to know that there's help available from professionals like Speech-language Pathologists and audiologists?

Lee Woodruff: Well, I think for anybody that finds themselves all of a sudden thrust into a situation, and that diagnosis -- that diagnosis that you first get about your child is shocking. You know, I'm sure there are parents -- and I think we all probably have an inkling when something's wrong -- but to finally hear it, and the way I heard it, living in London with their terminology, was "your child is deaf." And that, to me, was such a severe and strong word.

And so I looked to the people, like the speech pathologists, who were going to come into my home and help me as my lifeline. I mean, here were these people who had been educated in such a way and with these, sort of, you know, magic systems that were going to give my child the tools that she would need to go out in the world. And certainly, with Bob's recovery, speech was a huge -- speech and cognitive therapy were the two key elements. He didn't really have physical therapy issues. So it was his speech that was the most important. And when --early on, when he'd be tired in a day, and he had speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. If he felt like he was really weak that day, I would cut everything else off, but I wouldn't allow him not to do the speech therapy because I felt that was the most important thing for being able to rewire that brain and train him to be as much of the person as he had been pre-injury.

Facilitator: Mm-hmm. Well, a good part of your book documents what it can be like to be a caregiver in very demanding circumstances. What do you think professionals need to keep in mind about caregivers?

Lee Woodruff: Well, I think this is a really interesting and sort of undiscovered topic in so many ways because I think that there's so much focus on the patient.

Facilitator: Right.

Lee Woodruff: And the caregiver is really the person who has it all on their shoulders. And I think that in the early moments of a crisis -- and I know this was true with myself -- there was a heck of a lot of adrenaline flowing around so that I felt, you know, sort of super-human. But it's after that person kind of stabilizes, and you're faced with, sort of, the next part of the battle, that I think the caregiver is so susceptible to sort of crashing. And I think, too, there's a tendency for people who have initially rushed into the void to bring casseroles over or call and check that someone's okay, they have to retreat at a certain point. So I think that those two things can almost cripple a caregiver to the point of sort of feeling like, "I am all alone." And I think that, you know, there's a certain point that the eye needs to really be trained on the caregiver as much as the patient.

Facilitator: Mm-hmm. What do caregivers, do you think, need to remember about themselves in the role that they play for their loved ones? I mean is -- at root, what do they need to keep in mind, and how can they facilitate the work of professionals? What is so important for them to share with professionals that would help the professional do a better job?

Lee Woodruff: Well, caregivers are the ones that see it all, from 360 degrees.

Facilitator: Right.

Lee Woodruff: So I think that's really important to be able to work with the professionals because they really have the knowledge base that even the patient doesn't see because the patient is within themselves. There are two things that caregivers need to keep in mind, and one of them, I really loathe. And it's the old "you've got to take care of yourself, or you can't take care of anybody else." And I loathe it because I heard it so much, and I thought, "You know, how can I possibly take care of myself?" Like, how can I possibly think about going somewhere, or getting a massage, let's say? I remember a friend had given me a massage at one point, and I spent the whole hour on the table thinking, "I should be next to Bob's -- you know, by Bob's side right now. I shouldn't be doing this." So, yes, that's true. I mean, you need to recharge your batteries. You do need to act in ways that will nurture you as much as you can. And I think that's the caveat I would attach to that because certainly, caregiving is not a normal situation. It's not normal life. And so you're not going to be relaxed in every venture that you take. And I think the second piece of that is the caregiver needs to remember, they are the advocate for that patient, that they should never feel shy about asking a million questions, about, you know, jumping in there, about saying, "No, I don't think this procedure is worthy, and I need to get a second opinion, I think that the grind of caretaking somebody can wear people down, and we can become more submissive. And so we always need to remember that we are that person's best advocate.

Facilitator: Oh, that's very good advice. You know, in reading your book, it was clear that you learned a lot about TBI in the wake of Bob's injury, including that it occurs with startling frequency in every day life. ASHA has advocated for greater insurance coverage for care like cognitive rehabilitation services. And I'm wondering, what is your understanding of what the average American who suffers a TBI faces in terms of access to care?

Lee Woodruff: The average American with TBI faces a nightmare because insurance is so limited that if certain things aren't being met after a prescribed period of time -- and I'm sure that varies with each provider -- the services just end. And the insurance industry still views traumatic brain injury as something that has a real endpoint. And the endpoint is very realistic -- I'm sorry, it's very unrealistic. I can do that over if you like.

Facilitator: No, that's okay.

Lee Woodruff: Okay, so the endpoint that the insurance companies give to traumatic brain injury healing is completely unrealistic. It's something, in some cases, like 30 days or 60 days of rehab, maybe mostly generous at 90, but anybody with a traumatic brain injury knows that it's years.

Facilitator: Right.

Lee Woodruff: And for some people, a lifetime.

Facilitator: Right.

Lee Woodruff: And that that intensive cognitive therapy, which is not available at every place, can really help. It's tailored to what the person's strengths are, or what their occupation was in terms of working those muscles that get them back to being able to, you know, function at as close a level to normal as they can. So much work needs to be done in the area, certainly with hearing impairment. I am enraged when I think about the fact that children with congenital hearing problems do not have hearing aids covered.

Facilitator: Mm-hmm.

Lee Woodruff: I just was talking to somebody about one of the military members who was injured and has three children. One of them is a Down's syndrome child who's very hearing impaired. And they can't come up right now, on his disability payments, with the \$5,000.00 they need to buy her hearing aids.

Facilitator: Mm-hmm.

Lee Woodruff: So our foundation has gratefully agreed -- of course, I have a soft spot in my heart for anybody with hearing issues.

Facilitator: Right.

Lee Woodruff: And we've agreed to buy those hearing aids for his daughter. I mean, I just -- the fact that this -- I understand it a little bit with the elderly because I understand degenerative hearing loss, but I do not understand why a child with a congenital heart issue can get that paid for and surgery, and yet, my child can't get her hearing aids covered.

Facilitator: Right. Very well said. Well, Lee, I am wondering if I could ask you to please read from your book, "In an Instant." There's a lot there, but one passage that I was particularly struck by is at the end. And if you would, please, start with the very last line on page 270 and continue to the end.

Lee Woodruff: "I love you so much," Bob says to me, as he has always said through all the years of our marriage, through all the amazing moments and the incredibly hard ones, too. "I can't believe I got you as my wife," he says. And I know that there is no response required, none expected. When I look in his eyes, all the lights are on. He is so very much Bob again. He is that same boy I first saw in college, bouncing on his toes, an armload of books under his wing, ready for any adventure, serious about it all. His life was spared, and I know there must be a reason why. His work is unfinished in so many ways. He is a miracle man, my lucky man, and when he takes me in his arms to hold me, I can once again let him be the strong one. "You healed me," he says to me lovingly. "And I will always love you for that." "We healed one another," I answer. "All of us, and now we are home."

Facilitator: That's very nice, quite moving. And, you know, when I read that, I wanted to ask you if you would amplify on the point that you are making there, I think, the idea that we heal each other.

Lee Woodruff: We can't do this alone, and I think that part of the power of healing or coming to grips with a situation like, maybe, the diagnosis that a child is hearing impaired, you can't walk that walk without an incredible amount of support and love from family members, friends, community. These are scary things to go through, as so many experiences in life are. It doesn't have to be a roadside bomb or a pronouncement of hearing impairment for life. And I think that the power of family, and the power of people that sort of carry one another, and help them heal. Or maybe one day it's someone else's turn to hold faith in their hand for me because I don't feel it. I never could have gotten through without all of that. And I certainly couldn't have gotten through without Bob's determination to heal, or Nora's determination, sitting in all of her speech -- you know, in-home speech classes and her work with articulation and so forth. If I hadn't seen that determination with both of them, I don't think it would have been quite as easy to put one foot in front of the other each day.

Facilitator: Oh, that's very nice. And Lee Woodruff, this has been a real pleasure. Thank you so much.

Lee Woodruff: For me as well.

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