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## Meniere's Disease Sets Former Miss USA on a New Track

By: INTERVIEW BY ANDREA BOIDMAN

Andrea Boidman, chief operating officer of Deafness Research Foundation (DRF) and publisher of Hearing Health, sat down with 1998 Miss USA Shawnae Jebbia at the DRF offices in New York City on June 3, 2009, to discuss Jebbia's journey through the diagnosis and treatment of an early-onset of Meniere's disease.

**Andrea Boidman:** Shawnae, before we met I had a chance to see the YouTube recording of your 1998 Miss USA victory. It must have been an amazing experience.

**Shawnae Jebbia:** It was, especially since I wasn't a pageant-goer. For me, it was a new world. I was an NCAA Division 1 athlete and a personal trainer. I was working in television, though, so I knew this was a venue I wanted to transition into. It was interesting because I wondered, "Are they going to want me, or do I need to transform myself a little to fit into this pageant world?" I went off to the first couple of appearances and realized that I was going to have to work harder than I was expecting, which was a fantastic challenge. I just had to make sure I was prepared before I got to each city. If I was speaking for 11 minutes on breast cancer, I had to learn what was going on with breast cancer. I couldn't just search the Internet. I had to have a press briefing before I went. It was awesome – I got to grow professionally. It gave me a chance to showcase all my talents and hopefully be the best I could be.

**AB:** I understand that you've been diagnosed with Meniere's disease. Were you involved with hearing-related charities when you were Miss USA?

**SJ:** I didn't have hearing loss during my reign. It happened right at the end of it, developing slowly for about a year or two. I was traveling about 20,000 miles a month, constantly congested and sick. My allergies were horrible and I just never cleared up from a cold. I got a job at DIRECTV and was working 32, 33 days straight at 16, 18 hours a day. I was functioning, but my voice sounded horrible and I was not hearing things well. I got an MRI to see what was going on with my ears. By process of elimination, my ENT figured out what was wrong. I only had a couple of the symptoms of Meniere's. I had a fluctuating hearing loss and some ringing in my ears, but have never experienced vertigo. My symptoms were not severe. My diet while traveling affected my sodium levels and caused water retention, which was part of the disease. This was the onset of Meniere's.

**AB:** When you found out that you had the onset of Meniere's, what were those first few hours or minutes like? What were your initial reactions?

**SJ:** There was actually no initial reaction, since I had no idea what Meniere's was! The doctor explained my symptoms and warned that I might acquire others. So for me, the reaction of not being able to adjust for a year, knowing something was wrong was much more disheartening and troubling than learning I had the onset of Meniere's. We started to tackle the sodium levels, which really improved the ringing of the ears. It's not that much of an issue anymore. Hearing aids are a way to correct the hearing loss with Meniere's and hearing better also improves my vocal quality. If I hadn't gotten hearing aids, I wouldn't be talking the way I do now. When I take the hearing aids out, I talk much louder than normal. Since I have a background in broadcast, I'm sure to enunciate – and I'm Italian. I'm always talking!

**AB:** What advice would you give to somebody who was recently diagnosed with Meniere's?

**SJ:** Whenever there's something going on with you – even if it's mild hearing loss – you need to investigate. I actually



Shawnae Jebbia. Photo courtesy of Lauren Carceau



The Siemens Pure® 700 with the Siemens Tek® wireless enhancement is a Bluetooth® device that connects wirelessly to a phone. Photo courtesy of Siemens Hearing Instruments



Former Miss USA Shawnae Jebbia is entering the healthcare field, the next phase of her life, "without a doubt." Photo courtesy of Tina Hunter

have much more hearing loss than what is expected with Meniere's. Trying to find out what's wrong is most important, and if it is Meniere's, the challenge is treating all of those symptoms. Even with mild hearing loss, getting hearing aids is one of those things that you need to address, because if you don't, it will affect every facet of your life. You have to be proactive and address all the symptoms and figure out what you need to do with each one of them. I've been involved with Siemens this past year, speaking about my story and being candid and open. It's important to know that there are people out there who understand and have the knowledge to help you. I'm comfortable with myself now and able to speak to others more openly about Meniere's disease than I was in the beginning when I just didn't want to believe it was happening... sometimes I still want to deny it.

**AB:** And are you using Siemens products now?

**SJ:** Yes, the Siemens Pure® 700 with the Siemens Tek® wireless enhancement. Siemens was my first hearing aid 10 years ago and it's so interesting now, after 10 years, to see how everything has developed and how things have changed so drastically. I had no idea that there would be something like this now. You just get sort of set in your ways, thinking, "Okay, this is what we've got, this is all there is," but technology is evolving drastically. I can't wait to see what's going to happen in the next five years.

**AB:** Do you have hearing aids in both ears?

**SJ:** I got only one the very first time and then I realized I needed a second. Originally I got a tiny completely-in-the-canal hearing aid, thinking, aesthetically, that I didn't want anyone to know about it. Now I don't care about any of that and the hearing aids have gotten so much smaller and prettier. The kids like the bright colors – I like the ones that match my toenails.

**AB:** How does Tek work? Do you use it to make phone calls on a cell phone?

**SJ:** Yes. Siemens Tek wirelessly connects my Bluetooth®-enabled hearing aids to a number of everyday electronics, including my cell phone. As long as I keep the phone close to me, all calls ring directly into my hearing aids. I also use Siemens Tek to connect my hearing aids with my MP3 player. With the symptoms of Meniere's disease, some days I hear more clearly than others. Fortunately, my Tek device has multiple settings for days when my hearing is a bit worse. The multiple settings are useful in social situations as well. I may have it on my normal setting, but in a restaurant I always activate the directional microphones to minimize the background noise and help me just focus on what's in front of me. Sometimes you see a hearing impaired person cup their ears – that's sort of what's happening with directional microphones. Tek adjusts to different situations and does that work for me. And for me, the best feature is being able to watch television without closed-captioning! I had been watching closed-captioning on television for 10 years. Now I bring all my stuff with me, my little cords, and I just plug them into the back of the TV wherever I go.

**AB:** That's great. So what is next for you?

**SJ:** At first I was worried because I wasn't able to work in the business as successfully as I did in the beginning. It was frustrating for a couple of years, but I realized the most important thing for me was to understand what was happening to me and what I was going to do next. So I immediately dove into my education. I started classes to stimulate my mind and think of other things and then I realized, "Gosh, I really like healthcare." This is the next phase of my life without a doubt. I'm planning on getting a second degree, a Bachelor of Science, and intend to become a nurse practitioner.

Share your hearing loss story with Shawnae by logging on to [www.usa.siemens.com/decibel](http://www.usa.siemens.com/decibel) and following the "Talk to Shawnae" link. More information about Pure hearing instruments, Tek wireless enhancement and other solutions from Siemens Hearing Instruments can be found at [www.siemens.com/hearing](http://www.siemens.com/hearing).