

# EMPLOYEE APPROACHES LIFE, HEARING LOSS POSITIVELY

By Ann Jensis-Dale, DCMA Public Affairs



Tony Labath, Defense Contract Management Agency Virginia general engineer, doesn't let his hearing loss affect his positive attitude. (Photos by Carolyn Baum, BRTRC)

*“Your life will always be filled with challenges. It’s best to admit this to yourself and decide to be happy anyway.” — Brian G. Dyson, Coca-Cola Enterprises president and chief executive officer*

Anthony Labath, Defense Contract Management Agency Virginia general engineer, believes in living life to the fullest with a smile. Labath was born profoundly deaf, but rather than approaching life with a negative perspective, he approaches it in a positive way. “I was born deaf. Although most people would see this as being a ‘loss,’ I don’t,” Labath declared. “Since I was born deaf, how can I have lost 95 percent of nothing to begin with?”

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Never letting his hearing loss prevent him from personal success, Labath earned a Bachelor of Science in industrial engineering from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, and a Master of Science in engineering management from the University of Missouri, Rolla. Labath is also Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act Level III certified in systems planning; research, development and engineering; and production, quality and manufacturing.

At Southern Illinois University, Labath participated in a university cooperative program, where students had opportunities to work for a company throughout their educational careers. He started his co-op career in the Army and continued with the Army after college as an engineering intern and eventually as a journeyman engineer. “The folks from the U.S. Army Aviation Research and Development Command were my first interview for a co-op [student trainee] position. After that, I went to several companies to interview, and, almost right away, all of these companies sent me letters stating they could not accommodate me,” he explained. “It had been about nine months, but then one day I

received a letter from the Army requesting me to attend a plant visit” — an opportunity he forgot all about until receiving the letter.

Labath grew up wearing hearing aids, but after graduating college, his dog helped him decide to no longer wear them. “I don’t wear them anymore since my poodle-mix dog, Rambo, managed to get them and chew them up,” he said. “That was about 20 years ago. I just never got around to replacing them.” The hearing aids did help his hearing, but about 90 percent of the noise he heard while wearing them was not useful — basically white noise.

Labath is the resident engineer for NASA contractor facility Orbital Sciences Corporation located in Sterling, Va. His primary responsibilities include performing engineering surveillance on the Orion Launch Abort System for NASA’s Constellation/Ares Program. The LAS is designed to “jump away” to prevent failure at the launch pad or to bring the astronaut crew to safety during the new Ares rocket’s ascension. The Constellation/Ares Rocket System will be America’s next-generation space vehicle replacing the space shuttle orbiter.



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Similar to his co-workers, Labath uses a variety of communication equipment, including pagers, a BlackBerry® and computers, to perform his daily duties. Unlike his co-workers, however, Labath has a dedicated standalone videophone, the Z-150, that he uses for telephone calls. Using the videophone, Labath can call another person who also has a videophone, and they can see each other as they talk.

The Z-150 can also be used to call an interpreter service. The interpreters take the call, place a call to the hearing person who originally dialed and then establish a relayed conversation between the two parties, switching from verbal to American Sign Language and vice versa. Labath is trained to lip read and speak but has adopted ASL as his preferred method of communication. Labath's ability to lip read is especially useful for last-minute meetings where interpretive services cannot be arranged.

Labath noted that conference calls can be a challenge for both hearing-impaired and hearing employees alike. However, for a hearing-impaired person it can be extremely difficult. "In the beginning of the call, people remember to identify themselves but forget to continue to identify themselves throughout the call," he said. "What others don't realize is the interpreters rotate during the call, so we don't know who said what since the

new interpreter does not know everyone's voice."

Labath knows people are not purposely trying to exclude him. On the contrary, he understands people forget because they accept him as part of the group and simply forget about his hearing loss. Labath resolves this issue by ensuring he captures pertinent information and obtaining a copy of meeting slides beforehand. Regardless, he encourages employees to always identify themselves when speaking during a conference call. This makes it easier for everyone to know who

is speaking and makes following up after the meeting more convenient.

Outside of work, Labath adds to his collection of more than 400 Star Trek books and assists with building houses for Habitat for Humanity. "There's a wonderful appreciation and accomplishment with helping those less fortunate than I obtain the American dream," he remarked. "It's always a delight to see the family with their faces all lit up when they have the keys to the house." Labath quipped that losing a few pounds while volunteering has been especially nice. 



*Tony Labath at Orbital Sciences Corporation in Sterling, Va., with the Orion Launch Abort System, which will be used on the Ares launch vehicle to allow the astronaut crew to safely escape in the event of an emergency during launch.*