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PROFILE

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## Deaf Reckoning

**One day, I could hear perfectly. Then I couldn't hear a thing. What five years of deafness taught me.**

By Stacey McGovern | March 20, 2005

At 25, I had never imagined going deaf. I was a newly married third-grade teacher and a two-time nominee for Massachusetts teacher of the year. I was also pursuing a master's degree and working part time as a dance instructor. Without warning, a dark oil spill of silence began spreading over my world, destroying the life I had created. No doctor, no inner perseverance, no medication could stop this isolating fate we call deafness.

The medical world couldn't explain why my hearing was disintegrating, why each audiogram plummeted further. I knew *how* to hear, I just couldn't do it. I felt as though I had failed. My connection to others was crumbling; in just over a year, I was functioning as a profoundly deafened adult. It seemed impossible, since I always had perfect hearing. Still, there I was, trapped in a silent bubble.

My struggle was constant. I knew nothing about assisted-living devices, and I had a new baby whose cry I couldn't hear. I was an amateur lip reader, only catching pieces of what was said. My brain was overloaded, placing scattered words together. By the time I grasped a topic of conversation, the speaker was on to a new one. Minor tasks like ordering at a drive-through or running errands felt like climbing Mount Everest. When I asked people to repeat themselves, the typical response was "Never mind it's not important." Many spoke slowly, using simple words as if I were a child. I wanted to scream, "I'm deaf, not stupid!" I once asked a store clerk to put her answers on paper, and she wrote, "I don't have time, I need to help the next customer."

The person I loved most, my husband, returned each night, and sadly I had nothing left to give. Even with him, I often felt alone. I couldn't hear his voice, the sound of his breathing at night, or his footsteps. His jokes that once made me laugh were few and far between - who wants to tell a joke three times? Communicating became so difficult, we rarely did it at all. Even as I tried to accept the loss of my hearing, I longed for talking on the telephone, hearing birds chirp and dogs bark and leaves rustle, socializing, and understanding people. I wondered what my children's voices sounded like, and I missed my country music. The deaf community may feel differently, but my life had been built around hearing, and my loss was like a death to me.

Five years into deafness, my frustrations became insurmountable. Others understood my older child's words better than I, walking through parking lots was as dangerous as strolling the freeway, and the loneliness of silence was overwhelming. I watched my second child cry just after birth. His mouth contorted and his tiny face turned red, but there was no sound. Deafness shadowed everything.

In September 2003, I opted for cochlear implant surgery. It was performed at the UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester. The internal device of the system was implanted under the skin behind my right ear, and its electrodes were threaded through my cochlea and positioned close to my still-functioning auditory nerve. A month later, I received a gold-colored sound processor that communicates with the internal device and is worn behind my ear.

Just like that, I returned to a world I had forgotten was so noisy. Children's toys squealing, beeping noises in parking lots. (My car beeps when I unlock it!) Cellphones ringing everywhere. I had to figure out what all these sounds were again. I constantly asked, "What is that noise?" *Oh, my footsteps.* "And that noise?" *The car's blinker.* My implant was not an instant fix, and it doesn't work equally well for everyone. Initially, things sounded electronic, and I had to learn to hear via the implant. As my brain adjusted, sounds and voices normalized. Though the sound is synthetic and my ear is not involved, things now sound as I remember.

For the first time, I heard my sons speak. On the day after my implant was activated, a tiny voice came from

the back seat of my car: "I want orange." I pulled over. "Did you say you wanted orange?" My 3-year-old nodded while tears drenched my face. "I wanna orange pop, Mommy." Poor little guy must have been talking half his life from the back seat, and finally I answered him.

Weeks later, his brother said his first word - "Mama" - and I heard it! As I first approached a drive-through speaker with my implant, my nerves were ready for battle when a voice jumped at me: "May I take your order?" I screamed, "Yes! Yes, you can. I heard you." That day, I hit every drive-through within a 5-mile radius, just to experience the thrill of "May I take your order?" I am amazed by this miracle inside my head - this miracle that allows me to be independent, make phone calls, converse without struggling, hear alarms, doorbells, crickets, whispers, music, and my children laughing. I hear everything.

My passion for life has returned, but this time the passion feels different - maybe transformed by my struggle with deafness. My implant has given me a second chance at life. Things that once impressed me seem small and unimportant. Being able to connect again with people is untouchable. I smile when I walk away from a cash register and hear "Thanks, have a good day" behind me. I missed these simple pleasantries when I was deaf. It's easy to forget how nice people are when you can't hear them. Life seems so much kinder now. When I walk in the snow, I hear the crunch under my boots, and as I put my children to bed, I pause to hear the sound of their breathing. And each time I hear the laughter of a loved one, I am reminded of what five years of silence taught me.

*Stacey McGovern is on the board of the Gift of Hearing Foundation ([www.giftofhearingfoundation.org](http://www.giftofhearingfoundation.org)) in Cambridge. It raises money for cochlear implant research and advocates for patients. ■*

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