

Hello, my name is Melissa Benton. It is a privilege to share my experience with deafness and the cochlear implant.

I was diagnosed with a hearing loss at the age of three. Doctors believed the nerve damage was caused by a severe case of mumps and high fever when I was two years old. At the time of my diagnosis, I was found to be completely deaf in my right ear and had approximately 40% loss in my left ear.

In spite of my hearing impairment, I was a happy, outgoing child. I was also an energetic tomboy who earned the nickname 'Tiger' because of my fondness for playing football and picking on boys. I attended a mainstream school and had no difficulty making good grades. Although I was a good student, my classmates sometimes made fun of me because I talked funny and said "what?" all the time. Some of the children avoided making friends with me, probably because I was different and they didn't understand why. I did form some friendships; however, by the time I reached the 4th or 5th grade, my hearing loss was already having a significant impact on my self-esteem. I was beginning to experience feelings of self-consciousness and inferiority. Although I had always enjoyed interacting with other children, I was gradually becoming shy and withdrawn and was spending more and more time by myself. When not in school, I could usually be found hiding behind a book.

In the 5th grade, I had a teacher who would have made a better drill sergeant. The first time I missed an assignment because I didn't hear it, he accused me (in front of the whole class) of using my hearing impairment as a crutch and an excuse to get out of doing homework. Although my parents set him straight, I will never forget the humiliation I felt that day. Up to that time, there had not been a definite or obvious need for a hearing aid; however, soon after that incident, my parents bought my first hearing aid and I enjoyed improved hearing..... for a few years.

When I was thirteen, my hearing suddenly began to decrease. After diagnostic tests ruled out a medical cause, the doctor explained that nerve deafness is often progressive and told me that I would probably be totally deaf before I reached adulthood. Needless to say, I was terrified of my own future. One night as I prayed for a miracle, I became very emotional and threw my hearing aid, smashing it against the wall. Of course, I didn't mean to hit the wall with it. Fortunately, my parents were understanding and the hearing aid was not damaged beyond repair. My mother looks back at that night and says God answered that desperate prayer when I received my cochlear implant –He just answered in His own perfect timing.

During my teenage years, my hearing continued to decrease, and I became increasingly withdrawn from my peers. Although I managed to maintain honor roll grades throughout high school, I felt that I wasn't good enough for other teenagers, and I made few friends.

My hearing decreased to the point that I was considered legally deaf by the time I graduated from high school. The small amount of residual hearing was just enough to be amplified with a very powerful hearing aid. Although a hearing aid increases the volume of sound, it does not provide much clarity. Therefore, I was forced to rely on lip-reading and guessing. I dreaded social situations and kept to myself most of the time. My ability to communicate on the telephone was limited to just a few family members. The lack of independence and self-confidence was a challenge I had to confront every day throughout my young adult years.

I first heard about the cochlear implant in the '80's, but at that time, the reports were not very favorable, and I was told by my former ear doctor that the implant was only for people who could not hear with hearing aids. During the '90's, I occasionally asked my doctor about new developments with the cochlear implant. His answer was always the same: he didn't know whether I would be a candidate or not, because I was "getting by" with a hearing aid and lip-reading. When he did give me some information about the implant, that information was less than impressive. I threw it in the trash and resigned myself to a life of deafness. It never occurred to me that maybe there was more current information that reflected the positive facts about cochlear implants.

In September of '98, I went to the Deaf Action Center to find out about assistive technology to help with telephone communication. It was there that I met Esther Kelly, who showed me all the special telephones and assistive devices that help people cope with their hearing loss. Ms. Kelly also told me that she was deaf, but could hear with the cochlear implant. My first reaction was astonishment that she could hear and speak so well. I was even more pleasantly surprised when she told me she thought I might be a good candidate, because she was just like me before she had her implant. I was so excited! I even told her "forget the special telephone, I want the implant" and when I left there that day, I knew I was going to have a cochlear implant and hear on the telephone again. I did some research of my own, and a lot of praying. When I consulted with Dr. Robert Peters of Dallas Ear Institute and he confirmed that I was a candidate, my mind was already made up. Any questions that I had were trivial. I just knew that the cochlear implant was going to be the answer to a lifetime of prayers.

Dr. Peters performed my implant surgery in November '98. I went home the same day, with no complications, and there was just minimal pain from the surgery. After a four week healing period, the audiologists fit me with the external components of the device and programmed my speech processor. At first, everything sounded strange and distorted, but became more natural sounding within a few weeks. This is because I was suddenly hearing sounds that I had not heard since I was a child, and my brain was interpreting those sounds as strange. As I began to hear the new sounds repeatedly, the sound quality became more natural. This is the reason the clarity with the implant continues to improve for two or three years.

Prior to my implant, my ability to understand speech was only 12% with a hearing aid. One week after my initial programming, this had already increased to 76%. On my most recent hearing test, my speech discrimination score was 92%. This is without lip-reading, but in a quiet environment. I hear sounds at 30 decibels, which is considered just a mild hearing loss. Background noise and group situations are still somewhat difficult, but I definitely do much better in these situations than I did with hearing aids. My speech and quality of voice have improved tremendously, although I still have some characteristics that are attributed to having a profound hearing loss for many years. After two months of auditory telephone therapy with Linda Daniel of HEAR In Dallas, I communicate on the telephone with little difficulty. I enjoy music and television once again. I hear the birds sing and the rain falling. My life is less stressful and I have more confidence. I now look forward to the challenges of each new day.

I thank God every day for granting the miracle of a new life and restored hearing ability, through cochlear implant technology. Although the degree of success with the cochlear implant varies with each individual, this is proof that very dramatic results can be achieved, and I give God all the glory for mine. I truly believe that the reason I received such great results from my implant is that my God-given purpose in life is to help others with hearing loss. It is because of my gratitude and desire to help others receive the wonderful gift of hearing, that I became involved with the Dallas Hearing Foundation. My heart overflows with joy when I see deaf people hearing and speaking with the cochlear implant, and the memory of a child's face when she heard for the first time is *priceless*.

I am forever grateful to Dr. Peters, not only for performing the miracle of cochlear implantation, but also for giving me the opportunity to work for the Dallas Hearing Foundation as their first employee and administrator. After serving with the Dallas Hearing Foundation for 11 years, my husband and I relocated to my hometown of Fort Wayne, IN. I now have the privilege of helping cochlear implant candidates and recipients, as the Cochlear Implant Program Coordinator for Ear, Nose & Throat Associates. I am still amazed and overjoyed that God has not only restored my hearing ability, but has also blessed me with two very rewarding careers. I also have the privilege of volunteering as an Awareness Ambassador for Cochlear Americas.

The cochlear implant and my involvement with the Dallas Hearing Foundation, ENT Associates and Cochlear Americas have changed my whole life. That's why I tell my story – to increase awareness of the success of present day cochlear implants, and to provide guidance and assistance to individuals with hearing loss. I have come full circle and I embrace the realization that everything truly does happen for a reason. My experience with deafness has enabled me to help others who are struggling with the same challenges, and I wouldn't trade that for anything!