

Getting Her Life Back...

This Could Be *Your* Story

A few months before coming to the HLAA Convention last June, a Google search landed Debra Cannon at the local Bucks County HLAA Chapter in Pennsylvania and, as she says, “I was hooked!” It was then that she was able to tap into all the HLAA resources and mutual support to help make her decision to get a cochlear implant. A few months later, she would go to the HLAA Convention in Nashville to meet others like herself. She felt it deeply: she was no longer alone.

I was minding my own journalistic business at the HLAA Convention last June in Nashville when an informant came to me and said, “I got a scoop on a story for you...a real swell gal, young mom (34), hearing loss since age three, first convention, all enthusiastic, tears in her eyes...”

I was on it! I fled to the appointed place to meet Debra Cannon. She was everything and more, sitting with her mother, Louise Pollock. They had left “the boys” at home (their husbands and Debra’s three young sons) to come and see for the first time what the Hearing Loss Association of America Convention was all about.

Before joining the local chapter, Debra had never met anyone with hearing loss before. And, in Nashville, apart from her family, she finally found people who knew what she had been through.

Debra lost her hearing at age three due to bacterial meningitis, which left her deaf in one ear and a severe-to-profound hearing loss in the other. She was fitted with her first hearing aid at age five after her kindergarten teacher saw her struggling to finish her first spelling test. As she told me this story, tears welled up in her mother Louise’s eyes. The memory was still fresh.

“I worked very hard to hide my hearing loss,” Debra confessed. “I wore my hair long and bluffed.

I just wanted to be like everyone else and not be judged by my hearing loss.” Her mother adds, “Kids can be mean sometimes.”

She didn’t use any assistive listening devices in school, received academic honors, had an active social life went to Hahnemann University in Philadelphia and graduated with a degree in chemistry. Even with all that success, she still had not found a place where she felt comfortable, a place where people would not look at her hearing loss first. When Debra married, with each pregnancy her hearing grew worse. Her first-born, Michael, Jr., would end up being her ears on many occasions—a big job for a little boy.

Debra, Tell Us Your Story

I was mainstreamed throughout 12 years of Catholic schools in Philadelphia and then college and did very well. I learned speechreading and depended on body language and facial cues and seemed to manage just fine. I had been working in the finance field for 13 years and managing quite well in my positions both using the phone and speaking with clients.

My hearing was progressively getting worse, and each time it worsened, I compensated. Sometimes, it was nothing a newer or more powerful and expensive hearing aid couldn’t fix. I put tremendous energy into doing whatever I could to keep everyone from not only knowing I wore a hearing aid but also just how much I was truly struggling to hear. I was determined to live and function successfully in the hearing world.

This effort was exhausting and at times led to chronic headaches, vertigo, irritability and depression. I never revealed to anyone (well, my mother always knew) just how isolated and alone I felt in my slowly-turning-silent world...how the teasing

and ridicule from my early childhood days never left my mind...how I was tired of hiding and pretending and never feeling comfortable simply wearing my long hair down to my shoulders for fear that someone would see my hearing aid.

However, I fooled lots of people—friends, co-workers, colleagues and neighbors. What bothered me most was that while growing up, I never knew one other person my age or even close to my age with a hearing loss, except for maybe a friend’s great-grandparent. I had no one to share my fears and experiences with. No one who truly understood.

It was in the past three years that the little hearing I had left took the biggest dip ever. I woke up one morning and heard nothing. I thought my hearing aid broke! I was having difficulty hearing with the hearing aid, on the phone, everywhere, even standing in front of people. My family and friends were noticing too. I was getting worried about my ability to function for the first time in my life. It was with my latest hearing test, that my ENT doctor recommended that I see if I was a cochlear implant candidate. I went to the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and met Dr. Michael Ruckenstein.

After testing, it was determined that I would indeed benefit from the implant. It was decided that the surgeon would implant the “worst” ear, the left ear. I went on an educational journey and read everything I could about each cochlear implant company, each sound processor and the surgery itself. I talked to people who also had the surgery. I was informed of the risks and advantages. I knew that there was a chance it could fail completely but I went into it with high hopes and low expectations. I also was reaching out for help and needed reassurance.

I found the Hearing Loss Association of America online. I went to their Bucks County Chapter meetings and it was wonderful! I was excited to have found a family that I never knew existed and yet have always wanted to be a part of. Chapter President Marianne Lock became my new best friend. The warm smiles, understanding nods and kind words I received at my first chapter meeting, and other HLAA events, only reinforced my feelings that I now belonged to something wonderful. It only took me 30 years to find them! HLAA introduced me to the incredible amount of information, education, support, and technology that is available to help and assist people with hearing loss just like myself.

Speaking with those who have cochlear implants solidified my decision to get implanted. It was the best decision of my life. For the first time ever, I can take my hearing aid off in my right ear and still hear well! It is still difficult to hear different people's voices on the phone, but I am practicing. I can also listen to music again! It is a big step and a big commitment.

Getting a cochlear implant takes time, patience, courage, perseverance, and love and support from family and friends. I chose to get implanted because I felt I had nothing to lose (I already had no hearing) and everything to gain, even if the gain was only hearing a little bit more than I did. In reality, I am blessed to be hearing so well now. And from what I am told, I will be hearing more as the years go by. I choose to stay positive and believe.

Fast Forward to Now

Debra says it herself: "I have now become a big part of HLAA's mission—education, advocacy and support." She is the classic example of what this organization was founded on—helping herself then turning around to help others.

Debra is chair of the 2010 Pennsylvania Walk4Hearing to be held on September 25, 2010. She is also the secretary, marketing director and newsletter editor of the Bucks County Chapter of HLAA. She also serves on the Pennsylvania Advisory Council for

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“ I have very much enjoyed volunteering and giving back to HLAA. The organization and its members have given so much to me! I now have my confidence back. I was able to go out and find a job and not worry about my hearing or hearing on the phone with my cochlear implant. I truly feel like I am back in the game and got my life back! Everyone in my life has noticed a new me. ”

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“I'd like to dedicate all that I do for HLAA to my mother. It is through all that she has taught me...strength, perseverance, hope and faith that I am able to walk with confidence; knowing I have her love and guidance through any challenges I face in life. I have always felt that she has truly been the wind beneath my wings.”

the Pennsylvania State Office of HLAA. She lives in Warrington, Pennsylvania with her husband Michael and their three boys, Michael Jr. (9), Bradley (5), and Alexander (3). She can be reached at dtcannon5@msn.com.

Debra will attend the 2010 HLAA Convention this June in Milwaukee as a delegate from her Bucks County HLAA Chapter. Be sure to seek her out. You will know she is in the room when you feel the warmth from her smile and her energy!

For information about the HLAA Pennsylvania State Office go to www.hla-pa.org. For more information about the Pennsylvania Walk4Hearing and other walks across the country, go to www.Walk4Hearing.org.



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Barbara Kelley is editor-in-chief of Hearing Loss Magazine and deputy executive director of the Hearing Loss Association of America. She can be reached at bkelly@hearingloss.org.



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