

The author (36) shares his personal story. Read about his journey to opening up about his hearing loss and finally realizing he is not alone.

I was born with bilateral, mild-to-moderate hearing loss. With the exception of early childhood, I grew up around hearing people. My first four years of school were in special education classes with students with various degrees of hearing loss. In fourth grade, I was integrated into regular classes with hearing students. It was not easy being the only kid with a hearing loss. I started to shy away from other students to avoid teasing and bullying, of which I had my fair share. When I attended the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee for my degree in graphic design, I focused mainly on studies. My lack of socialization didn't bother me much. Once I graduated, I shifted my focus to building a career. Then there came a point when I started longing

for friends, and even wanted to date someone. Unfortunately, I didn't have any success. With not having a lot of friends at work or outside, I was looking for an answer. It got to the point where I was starting to hate myself.

My Hearing Loss Journey

My journey started when my parents and sister were vacationing in the Wisconsin Dells tourist area. They were in the Storybook Gardens, and an angel asked my sister for a wish. She wanted a baby brother. My parents were so touched by her wish that they brought me into this world. I was born three weeks ahead of schedule, fully developed but weighing just four-and-a-half pounds. However, I was also born hard of

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hearing. At the time, newborn infants were not tested for hearing loss, so nobody knew that I had a hearing loss for several years.

I was a happy child and everything seemed normal to my parents for a few years. But, when I didn't talk even at two years old, they became concerned. Others reassured them that some boys develop speech a little later than usual, and so they shouldn't worry too much. Even so, my parents took me to the Children's Hospital in Milwaukee for an evaluation.

After a half-day of evaluation, the doctors concluded that I was hyperactive, and at their suggestion, I was enrolled in a special class for young children with developmental needs. As far as I was concerned, I was just happy to go on the little school bus and get all the attention at school. Little did I know that I wasn't hearing everything; my residual hearing fooled everybody! I used to say 'oopa' with much excitement when the school bus came to our house to pick me up, and my parents couldn't figure out that what I was trying to say was 'school bus.'

Fortunately, a breakthrough came when I visited India with my family a year later. My uncle took me to an excellent ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist and had him test me.

The ENT just played with me, asked me questions, and mostly observed my responses. After his evaluation, he told my family that he strongly believed I had a hearing loss and recommended that we see an audiologist when we returned to the United States. Sure enough, proper auditory testing revealed that I had a bilateral, mild-to-moderate hearing loss.

Right away, I was fitted with hearing aids. My mother told me that my face lit up the first time I wore them. She had never seen that look on my face and was happy to see such a big smile. I felt fortunate to hear many of the sounds a person with normal hearing would hear.

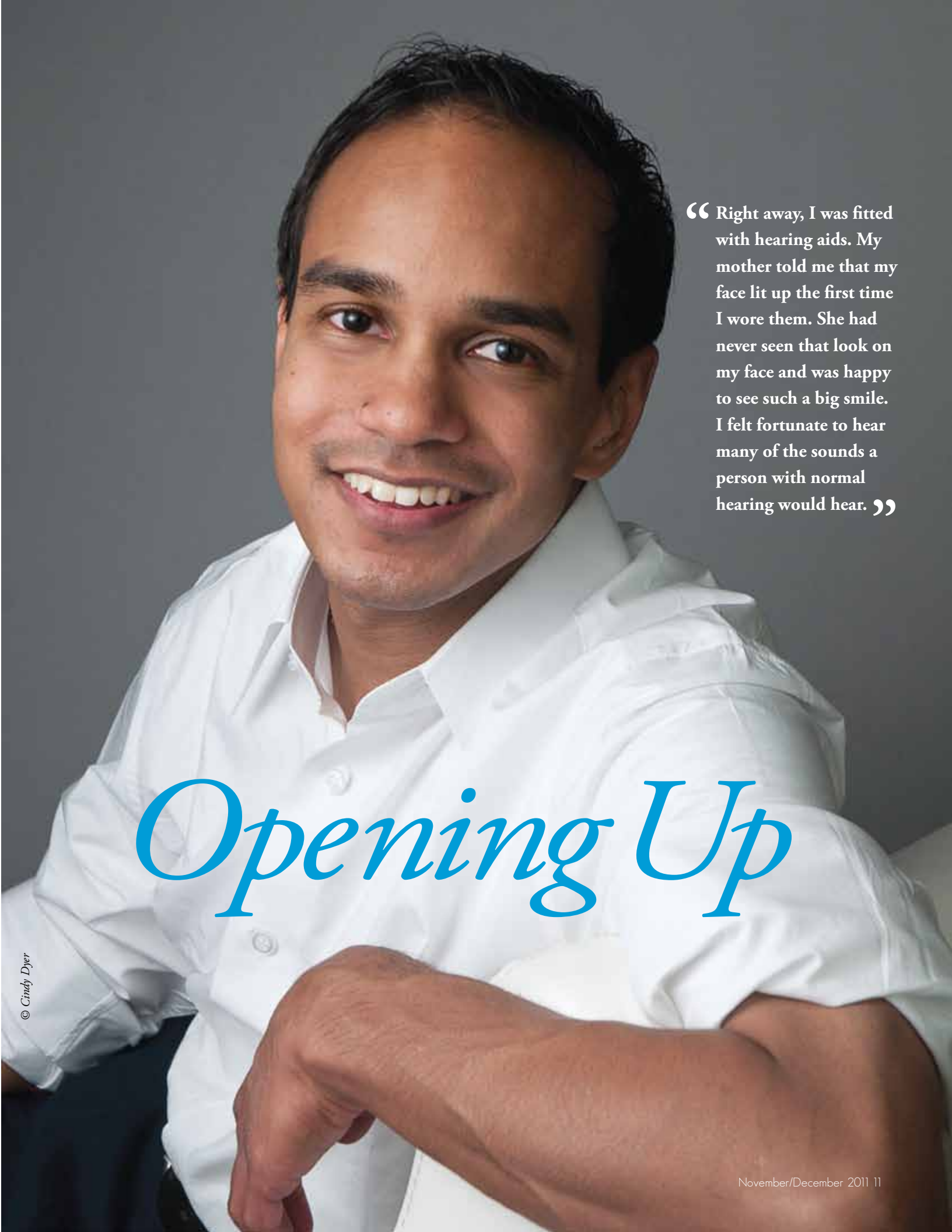
Education Challenges

I was placed in a special program for deaf and hard of hearing children at Lowell Elementary School in Waukesha, Wisconsin. By then, I had lost about four years of hearing and language development, and was playing catch-up with my peers. The teachers at Lowell School were wonderful and I was just happy to finally hear and understand everything.

Every morning I would arrive early at school, put on a box with a transmitter and receiver, and then play with the school-supplied building blocks. The memory is so vivid that I can still see the sun rising as I stacked the blocks as high as possible before watching them come tumbling down. It was a special moment in my life as I began my journey in the hearing loss world. I believe this memory is the perfect metaphor for how hard I've been working to stand tall and never give up, even when it seems everything is tumbling down around me.

My years at Lowell Elementary School were the best times of my childhood. Thinking back, I suspect it was because I was with other deaf and hard of hearing students, and

continued on page 12



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Opening Up

Opening Up *continued from page 10*

there was no one to make fun of me. Outside of school, not too many people knew that I had a hearing loss since my mom kept my hair long on the sides to cover my hearing aids. For many years after that I continued to hide my hearing loss but later I changed my hairstyle to be shorter. Looking at my old pictures, I ask myself, What was I thinking?!

When I reached fourth grade, the special education board decided that I was ready to join regular school with a few sessions of speech therapy. Since our house was closer to a different elementary and middle school, I had to leave all my friends and start over in the new school with hearing students. Making friends became much more challenging, and I kept most of my problems to myself, rarely going to my teachers or parents about them. I think this molded my adult life.

Some of my experiences at middle school, high school, and college included:

- On orientation day with the regular class, a teacher accompanied me in a group of hearing kids. I remember feeling anxious and nearly passing out, but I didn't tell anyone about the incident, not even my parents.
- When I started middle school, one of my classmates asked me to sit with him during lunch. He was sitting at a cool table with popular kids. However, when I joined the group, the girls at the table gave me that look as if I didn't belong there. Seeing their faces made me feel like an outsider, and I never sat at that table again.
- I took a band class in middle school because I loved playing drums. My drum teacher was very supportive of me, but other drummers used to tease me a lot during the class. If I messed up, they would giggle among themselves. I remember that a red-headed girl, who was the only girl playing the drums, would always pretend to like me by flirting and making facial expressions.



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When I moved away, the others would laugh with her. Eventually I dropped out of band just to avoid being teased.

- During high school, I became extremely shy and avoided any attempt at making friends. I was afraid of being teased and hurt even more. I spent most Friday nights with my parents rather than going to parties or other social outings.
- My days at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee were fine since I was dealing with more mature students, and I had a lot of support from the University. I didn't have much time to think of anything except studying hard and getting a good job. I graduated with a high GPA and even got a full-time job before my graduation! As I said earlier, my primary goal in college and in my career was work, not

friends and fun—although I had to work much harder than hearing people to compete in the workforce.

As a result of these experiences, I had trouble socializing in my adult life, and ran into several communication barriers when it came to meeting people and making friends. Although I can hear almost everything with my hearing aids, I still struggle to understand what everyone is saying, especially with background noise. There were times when people would talk to me using their low voices and I would nod along, even though I couldn't catch all the words. And it was frustrating to constantly ask people to repeat themselves.

Seeking and Getting Help Lifting the Communication Barriers

When I attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) in the late 1990s, I was eligible to receive DVR (Division of Vocational Rehabilitation) funding. They helped cover the cost for hearing aids, tuition, and services provided at UMW. I found UWM's services beneficial,



My older sister, Sheila, and me

especially note takers—students who UWM hired to take notes during lectures for me. Even with my hearing aids, sometimes I struggled to take notes while listening to professors, and note takers helped me keep up with the classes. I also knew some deaf and hard of hearing students who used sign language interpreters. That was more than 10 years ago, and I'm sure even more services are being offered in schools today thanks to advances in technology and expertise.

I accomplished a lot more in my life than my parents ever imagined. My mother told me that she doubted I would ever learn to speak or understand people. She even thought I might not get to graduate from college someday. Fortunately, hearing aids, speech therapy, and hard work have gotten me to where I am today.

As the school years went on, I got out of the special education classes and became fully mainstreamed into classrooms with hearing students. I graduated from college and secured a full-time job as a web designer.

I was not happy with the way I looked back in high school and college, and I have come to realize that the hearing aids were a major reason why I was and still am so isolated from the outside world. There were also other reasons that played a big role, such as my shyness and not having an outgoing personality. Rather than analyzing the past each and every day, I have decided to open up and share my life experiences and the path that led me to where I am today.

Reaching Out to Others Through Blogs

In 2008, I started an online forum as a way of getting out of my shell and reaching out to others. From that day, my life started to change. My first posting explained my reason for starting the blog: to express my thoughts, feelings, and tell stories about my hearing loss, with hopes of creating an interactive forum to benefit everyone.

I learned more about how the Internet-driven world, especially social networks, could be used to connect



My family helped me celebrate graduating from UWM in 2008. Left to right: my mother Lakshmi holds my nephew Nathan; my father Nallaswamy; my sister Sheila and her husband Mike Washburn.

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people with hearing loss. When I created a group in Facebook including a link to my website, it attracted more members to DeafandHoH.com and encouraged them to share their experiences and struggles.

I was so excited, I started two more websites: one for blogs (www.OuterChat.com) and one for a hearing loss forum (www.OuterDialog.com). I wrote more than 100 posts, and it became the journey of my life! It felt good to let out my feelings after all these years. After reading other people's responses to my postings, I learned that I wasn't the

only one in this world struggling with hearing loss.

As the discussions grew in the forum, people started asking for places where they could meet and chat with others. I began Open Chat Night. Some inspiring moments from the chat:

- A 10-year-old girl, accompanied by her mother, needed to vent her feelings for not having friends at school. That really touched my heart and reminded me of how I felt in school. Listening to other people who had gone through similar experiences helped her to feel not so alone, and she realized that she didn't have to let these setbacks limit her.
- A young man from Iowa who couldn't afford a computer would make trips to the local library, using their computers to talk with the other Open Chat Night members until closing time,
- A deaf teenage girl from Canada with cerebral palsy comes regularly to our sessions. The chat means the

continued on page 14

Opening Up *continued from page 13*

world to her; she tries not to miss a single session and always informs us if she can't make it.

- One time a person from Egypt came to the chat in spite of the time difference!

I truly had no idea when I started this venture that it would have such a positive impact on so many lives! I have about 300 subscribers and the Facebook group is slowly expanding with more members as well.

I have taken steps to actively get involved in the community, such as the Milwaukee Walk4Hearing and the HLAA Chapter meetings in the Milwaukee/Racine area. I am also getting tremendous support from a few people at work, when before I would not have allowed myself to make any friends there.

At some point, most of us have allowed hearing loss to become a roadblock to enjoying life to the fullest. One of the most important roadblocks is communication. Communication is a crucial part of our daily lives and it can affect relationships with family and friends. It can affect your communication skills with co-workers on the job, and even your grades. I am sure many of us with hearing loss have dealt with at least one of these communication roadblocks, each of which leads to endless problems for the present and future.

We have to keep finding ways to integrate solutions to these barriers. The use of hearing aids, cochlear implants, assistive listening devices, captioning, and loop systems help us to become a part of society where we can more easily communicate with others.

I am always saddened and surprised to hear about people who have gone through so many years of dealing with hearing loss without using the technology that would change their entire life instantly. We need to advocate more strongly for the supply of technological information to these people.



My family gathered for a wedding in New York in September. Left to right: my nephew Nathan, my father and mother, my niece Anika, sister Sheila and husband Mike.

The Journey Continues

Using the Internet really helped me to open up, share my experiences, and reach out to others. I am slowly becoming more social and getting out of the house more than ever before. Rather than curling up in a ball and quitting, I will continue to reach out to people. It makes me feel good about myself to contribute and help others. Over the past several years, I've learned that I'm not the only person in this world facing these challenges. That's what I want everyone to realize when they join this community; they've become a part of a group where everyone cares about you and will support who you are. Just remember—you're not alone.

Giving up is not part of my vocabulary. I have learned that you must like yourself for other people to like you, so I will continue to move forward with my goals and stay positive about myself. I know good things and people are all around me. I can't wait to experience whatever comes next! 🙌🙌🙌

Senthil Srinivasan lives in Waukesha, Wisconsin, and for the past six years has worked as a web designer for PowerSports Network in Sussex, Wisconsin. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with a bachelor's degree in graphic design. You can read his blog at OuterChat.com.



There is more to hearing loss than a hearing aid or cochlear implant.

Visit an HLAA Chapter and meet others who also have hearing loss.

HLAA Chapters are supportive organizations where people with all degrees of hearing loss come together to share and learn—and where it's okay not to hear well.

To find a chapter near you go to www.hearingloss.org or call 301.657.2248. If you would like to start a chapter, contact Elizabeth LeBarron, national states and chapters coordinator, at elebarron@hearingloss.org.