

Catching Up With

Katherine Pawlowski

**First Walk4Hearing
Ambassador**

INTERVIEW WITH CINDY DYER

In 2014, Katherine and her mother, Megan, contacted HLAA to brainstorm on how Katherine could get more involved with the Walk4Hearing. Katherine came up with the campaign called, “Why I Walk,” and also the idea of a coloring book, which was given out at the kickoff as well as other Walks. Katherine was named the first Walk4Hearing ambassador that year, and she and her mother traveled to many Walks to represent children with hearing loss. Six years later, *Hearing Life* visited with Katherine to catch up on her life and her continuing advocacy efforts.

A Mother’s Perspective

How did you learn about Katherine’s hearing loss?

Katherine initially failed her newborn hearing screening at the age of one month. A few weeks later, she passed a second screening. As parents without prior experience with hearing loss, we were not prepared to challenge the audiologist. Then at the age of three, Katherine had severely delayed speech and pronunciation and was misdiagnosed with apraxia. After a year of therapy, we had her hearing retested. Her sedated hearing test revealed that she had profound, progressive sensorineural hearing loss in her right ear and mild hearing loss in her left ear.

What were your initial reactions to her diagnosis?

We were thrilled to learn why Katherine had delayed speech and pronunciation and even more excited to discover that we could help her by providing proper hearing aids! We explained to her siblings that her hearing loss was a part of her and should be accepted with the rest of her, just like they would accept people needing glasses to see clearly. The boys were patient and also understood that we couldn’t play loud music or yell because the sounds would hurt Katherine’s ears.

What resources did you have available?

We were fortunate to have access to many resources for Katherine within Fairfax County, VA. We only wish we had received the correct diagnosis when she was a baby. However, Katherine has always been very driven and she has learned advocacy and speech commands, as well as how to take proper care of her hearing aids.

With proper access to sound, augmented by speech therapy, Katherine was able to focus on verbal articulation techniques, and she currently commands these skills.

Left: Katherine Pawlowski with her parents, Megan and Sebastian

Do you believe that early intervention helps children reach their full potential?

Absolutely! However, lots of love and support from family and friends is as important as early intervention. Resources like HLAA, which we first learned about at a Walk4Hearing event, are also a huge help.

What was it like when Katherine was named the first Walk4Hearing ambassador?

Katherine was very honored and took the role seriously! She spent a lot of time developing the “Why I Walk” campaign, as well as brainstorming ideas about how she could best serve—all at the tender, young age of eight. We were (and remain) very proud of Katherine and her will to advocate for herself and others.

What advice do you have for parents whose children have been diagnosed with hearing loss?

I would advise parents to remain positive and advocate for your child. Ask lots of questions and ensure that your child’s school is providing all of the resources that are available. And it’s so important to love your child unconditionally. Hearing loss is a part of them, and the sooner they know that you accept the loss, the sooner they will accept it, too. Remember, you are their role model!

A Daughter’s Viewpoint

Katherine, can you remember your reaction to having your hearing aids switched on?

Yes! At the age of three, I remember the feeling of pure excitement! I was informed of the hearing loss and told that as long as I wore my hearing aids, I wouldn’t have to go the extra mile to understand a conversation. I picked out super fun, pink hearing aids! My mom and dad made sure that they socialized my hearing loss with my classmates to demystify what were in my ears and explain how it helped me hear. Needless to say, all of my classmates wanted hearing aids, too!

What have your parents taught you about coping with hearing loss?

My mother has taught me to advocate for myself and to never be afraid to raise my hand in class if I’m confused. My father has taught me that having hearing loss doesn’t make me any different from anyone else and can actually be an advantage. I’ve learned to accept the bad, rise above it and find the good.



Then: The Pawlowski family was featured on the May/June 2014 cover of our magazine. Now: the Pawlowski family six years later © Cindy Dyer



What was it like to be named the first Walk4Hearing ambassador?

It was very exciting because I was given the chance to meet other kids who were just like me. The best thing was being able to start a legacy, knowing that there are other people who are deaf and have hearing loss, and that no one is alone. I traveled to Walks along the east coast and met kids with various stages of hearing loss. I was also able to host a few events and raise awareness about hearing loss in my community.

Tell us about your continued advocacy on behalf of people with hearing loss.

Earlier this year, I wrote a letter to Virginia State Senator Richard L. Saslaw, explaining why we should pass a law that can help students who are deaf or have hearing loss. A few weeks later, he replied to my letter, saying that he would support it and that he agrees with me.

Have you been to an HLAA Convention?

Yes, I went to an HLAA Convention a few years ago with one of my best friends, and we both had the opportunity to volunteer. We had a great time meeting people and exploring different types of companies, resources and agencies. Meeting others helped my friend gain greater appreciation and understanding of my hearing loss.

How do you advocate for yourself?

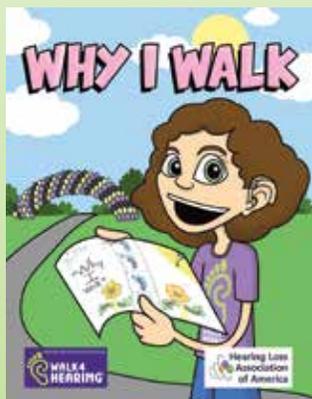
I advocate at school by insisting that I have seat at the table when my individualized education plan (IEP) is discussed, as well as ensuring that the teachers have actually read the plan and are generally compliant throughout the school year. I ensure that I have proper classroom seating, raise my hand for clarification when needed, request teacher notes, and clarify homework assignments and due dates. When any of these items are out of alignment, I engage my itinerant teacher for additional support.

Tell us about a few of your favorite things.

- My favorite childhood memory is a family trip to the Outer Banks with my family, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents.
- The best road trip I ever took was when I went to Wintergreen Resort for a skiing and tubing trip with my family over a Christmas holiday.
- My favorite subject in school is English. Literature is always changing; however, the power and meaning behind the words remain the same.
- I love to read! My favorite authors are J.K Rowling, who wrote *Prisoner of Azkaban*; Victoria Aveyard,



Katherine filming a promo in her role as ambassador for the Walk4Hearing on the lawn of the Lincoln Memorial in 2014



Katherine came up with the "Why I Walk" campaign as well as the coloring book idea.



Then and now: Katherine with her siblings, Alex, Nicholas and Elizabeth



author of *Red Queen*; and Louisa May Alcott, who was best known for writing *Little Women*.

Anything else we should know about you?

- I think my friends would say I'm crazy, funny, and really clumsy—I'm definitely not graceful when walking.
- I wish my friends understood that sometimes I do need help hearing, especially in group settings when a lot of people are talking at once.
- I have a talent for singing, and I can play the ukulele.
- I love cooking, listening to music, reading, and playing sports like soccer and basketball.

What are your plans after high school?

I want to further my education by attending college, and learning either something in health sciences, social sciences, or something with education.

I learned that you wrote to American Girl and asked if they could create a doll with hearing loss.

When I was five years old, my mom took me to American Girl to buy a doll that looked “just like me.” I have always loved to sing and dance, so I made up a song for American Girl, asking them to make hearing aids for their baby dolls. My mother recorded a video of me singing and sent it to American Girl, and just this year, they came out with Joss Kendrick, a doll that wears a hearing aid. I think that Joss' story is very inspiring! It's great that American Girl has released a doll that has hearing loss, because there are girls out there who now have a doll that is “just like them.”

What advice do you have for parents who have just learned that their child has hearing loss?

I recommend letting your child know that hearing loss is a part of them and will be accepted along with the rest of them. Normalize it as much as possible. Spend time with your child so that your child and everyone in their friends and family circle can all become familiar with what it means to have hearing loss. Help them understand how their hearing device works. Engage in different groups or foundations within the deaf and hearing loss community so your child doesn't feel alone. For me, this was super important, and I have made a lot of great friends!

What words of wisdom do you have for other kids with hearing loss?

My mom always says, “Let your smile change the world, don't let the world change your smile!” Keep a positive mindset! **HL**

Katherine's Letter to Senator Richard L. Saslaw

Dear Senator Richard L. Saslaw,

Greetings. My name is Katherine Pawlowski. I am an eighth grader who attends Longfellow Middle School. It has come to my attention that the bill, SB564 hasn't been passed by the committee, so as a citizen who falls under your representation I believe that I should be able to show you why this bill could make such a great impact and difference in our community. The bill SB564 was mainly made to help the deaf and hard of hearing students, along with students that have speech disabilities. As a student who struggles with both of these disabilities and has faced struggles from them, I urge you to help pass this bill because it will not only help improve the education of students with their disabilities but this bill will help monitor and coach the students.

According to Healthy Hearing, “14.9 percent of children between the ages of 6 and 19 have hearing loss of at least 16 dB in one or both ears. Even hearing loss in only one ear has a tremendous impact on school performance; research shows anywhere from 25% to 35% of children with unilateral hearing loss are at risk of failing at least one grade level.” In 2017-18 there was a count of the amount of students that had a speech or language impairment issue and the percentage was nearly 20%. According to another source, known as the National Center for Biotechnology, “Despite promising developments in the education of deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) students, their achievement continues to lag behind that of their hearing peers, and many do not acquire the knowledge and skills to reach their full potential.” These are only a few of the sources that prove how underestimated speech and hearing disabilities are and why this bill needs help in order to pass the committee faster and become a law.

All of these facts justify this bill and I know that the effect the bill can have will, and can, help prevent students from failing a grade level because of their disadvantages and or disabilities. One of the best ways to prevent something would be to detect it when it first arrives which is what the bill offers. According to the bill, “This system shall be for the purposes of identifying and monitoring infants with hearing loss to ensure that such infants receive appropriate early intervention through treatment, therapy, training and education and tracking the language development of children who are identified as deaf or hard of hearing.”

I assure you and hope that you choose to help pass this bill and help it become a law, because it will only help and benefit the students who weren't given the same possibility of having a great education.

Sincerely,
Katherine Pawlowski

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September 19	Louisville, Kentucky
September 20	New York City
September 26	Buffalo, New York
September 26	Chicago
October 10	San Diego
October 11	Cary, North Carolina
October 11	West Windsor, New Jersey
October 17	Washington, D.C.
October 18	Philadelphia
October 25	Brighton, Massachusetts
November 7	Mesa, Arizona
TBD	Houston

