

# Birds of a Feather—

BY ALLYSON T. WELCH



Kally, Mochi, and  
Ally © Scott Sarmir

# Better Together

**B**efore I had my daughter, Kally, I didn't know a single person with hearing loss other than myself. I struggled alone for decades with something few understood, and many made light of. Sadly, it wasn't unusual for people to tease me, even in the workplace. I'd put on my big girl britches, play along, giggle, then walk away and quietly die a little inside. I was increasingly intimidated by how frustrated people became when I asked them to repeat themselves, especially whenever I had to ask more than once. This made me afraid of asking, so depending on the situation I often decided not to bother. As you can imagine, the more this went on, the more lost I became. I was missing some really important pieces of the "big picture." I wasn't a very good self-advocate at the time and didn't know where to turn for support. It became too much to handle, so in my early thirties I finally talked to my doctor who sent me to see an audiologist.

I was diagnosed with moderate to severe bilateral hearing loss and was able to get hearing aids with financial assistance from my state's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (a federally funded, state-run program that helps people who have physical or mental disabilities to get and/or maintain a job). The hearing aids not only helped me to hear, but they vastly improved my personal and professional relationships by means of enabling more efficient communication.

Little did I know that the trials and tribulations I faced and conquered would one day help me to guide, support, and advocate for a child... a child of my own.

## The Apple Doesn't Fall Far from the Tree

My daughter Kally was born in February 2009. Aside from having colic, she was a seemingly happy and healthy baby. Over the course of her first two years of her life, however, she suffered from chronic ear infections that weren't responsive to antibiotics. Just after her second birthday she had myringotomy surgery (a common outpatient surgical procedure intended to equalize pressure between the middle ear and the environment by allowing fluid from the infection to drain, reducing inflammation). This procedure ultimately helped decrease her frequency of ear infections. I'll always remember the day the tubes

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fell out as she called me from the bathtub saying she found two little blue straws in the water.

By the time Kally was in prekindergarten it had become clear that she was having trouble hearing. Kally was seen by a local audiologist who tested her and said she did indeed have some level of hearing loss. The audiologist recommended she see a pediatric audiologist for more testing, so I took her to Children's Hospital and their results confirmed her diagnosis of mild to moderate sensorineural bilateral hearing loss. My heart ached for her. I knew she'd face similar struggles as I had, but I also knew she'd be ok with the help of hearing aids and my love and support. I made sure she knew nothing was "wrong" with her. In fact, she was just like mommy. We vowed to tackle this together and have done so successfully ever since.

## They Want to Be Like Me

The first day at school with new hearing aids worried me a bit, but of course I didn't let on. Kally has always been very carefree and self-confident and she wasn't worried whatsoever about what others might think or say about her new hearing aids. As her mommy and biggest cheerleader, I needed to make sure my fears about her classmates' potential reactions remained unnoticeable. I made a conscious effort to make it seem like it wasn't a big deal, so she felt confident going to school. I dropped her off and gave her an extra big squeeze and tried not to worry.

When I picked her up from kindergarten later that day, I asked her if anyone noticed her hearing aids. Her face turned red, she rolled her eyes and said “Mommy, the kids wouldn’t leave me alone.” My heart sank. She then said, “everybody kept saying how cool they look and now they want some, too.” I smiled, relieved, as she went on to tell me how they want to be like her. While Kally seemed frustrated at the attention she received, I couldn’t have been happier about the outcome.

After the spectacle of her fancy new hearing aids wore off, her classmates quit asking about them. She moved through elementary school without a single instance of teasing or bullying. I’m especially proud that she is not only a great self-advocate, but she has made a lot of friends by advocating for others. She doesn’t just stand by and witness ugly behavior; she speaks up instead. Standing up for herself is one thing but extending that love to others is her superpower.

### **With the Right Support, the Sky’s the Limit**

One thing I did not have when I was growing up is a support system of any kind for my hearing loss. I was undiagnosed and struggled to some degree with my grades due to communication issues. Unlike me, Kally has received a wealth of support through the school system. She has had great teachers, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in place to afford her special accommodations, a speech therapist, and special audio equipment to use in the classroom.



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Perhaps the support for which I am most grateful comes in the form of one very special person... the school district’s deaf and hard of hearing teacher, Cydney Lanning. Mrs. Lanning went above and beyond in her support role for Kally. She not only worked with Kally on speech, reading, writing, and various school assignments but she often came to see Kally on Field Day, at choir concerts, and basketball games. Here is what she had to say when I asked her for a contribution to this article:



From left: Kally, Ally, Ally’s fiancé Jason Osantowski, and his daughter Paige

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*I had the pleasure of starting to work with Kally when she was in second grade. She was so sweet and absolutely rocked her sparkly, turquoise hearing aids! Kally has one of the most challenging types of hearing loss. The kind that makes her look like any other kid. The kind that she could hide (if she wanted to). The kind that made people often say, “Oh, she can hear me. She just doesn’t pay attention!” However, each time we worked together, tweaked modifications, worked on speech, and consulted with teachers, I discovered she was missing so much instruction. Even more difficult was the fact that she didn’t know she was missing it! I remember reteaching an assignment with her. I stopped and asked her what the topic meant (I can’t remember it now but let’s say it was immigration). She looked at me and said, “I have absolutely no idea.” We reviewed the meaning, looked at pictures, and discussed scenarios. All was well but that was just one thing I caught in my weekly time with her. It’s so important to have a team that “gets it.” Accommodations are so important! It’s imperative to turn on captions, have excellent team and parent communication (Ally is awesome), honor requests, and of course implement proper amplification equipment. Kally is very self-motivated. She loves school, music, art, basketball, and reading. She advocates for herself. She has a heart of gold. The sky’s the limit for her. —Cydney Lanning, M.A.*

### **Cats, Rats, and Brats**

As a mommy/daughter duo with hearing loss, it can be very challenging for us to communicate at times. I strive to listen, but don’t always hear exactly what Kally is saying. There have been many instances where we thought we were on the same page only to find out later we were talking about two completely different things. Thankfully, those miscommunications have been harmless and sometimes even humorous.

The biggest struggle for me is that I don’t always know when she is mispronouncing words or names. I remember our neighbor telling me she thought it was really cute that Kally called her cat “Mintons.” I pondered for a moment in confusion and said, “but her name is Mittens.” She said, “No... Kally is calling her Mintons—not Mittens.” I couldn’t even hear the difference!

Another example of mispronounced names presented itself a couple years ago when we pulled up at Applebee’s for lunch one day. We parked right under their sign and before we got out of the car Kally looked up and said, “Wait... what?” She pointed at the sign and told me she’s always thought it was called Apple Beast’s (facepalm). Sometimes we call it Apple Beast’s now just for fun.

I’m so excited for Kally. She has a new best friend (I’m in second place now) and a companion to help her with her hearing needs for years to come. And while Kally is still a child living at home, her dog will also be helpful to me as she alerts Kally to sounds I cannot hear either. Mochi doesn’t know how important she is, but we do, and we love her so much!



More recently she asked if we could have rats for lunch (she was actually referring to bratwurst or brats). I have always joked around and called them “brats” (pronounced like the spoiled child kind of brat) and I just found out she’s always thought I was saying “rats.” We laughed until we cried. I’m sure her friends think we eat rats, which may be why they’re not lined up at the front door begging to join us for a meal.

## Together, We Make One Hearing Person

Kally and I have different levels of hearing. While one of us may not be able to hear a knock at the door, an ambulance drive by, or an oven timer beeping, the other does. When we are in public and are spoken to, we can tell when one of us can’t hear correctly and we “spot” each other to fill in the conversation gaps. When I yawn, I can’t hear anything, so she knows to stop talking for a few seconds, then picks up exactly where she left off when I’m finished. We know that after asking each other to repeat something more than once it’s easier to spell the word(s) so the other understands. She gets me, and I get her.

As much as I hate that Kally shares hearing loss with me, it has been a true blessing to have each other to get through it. I’ve never had anyone understand me the way she does, and I’ve never understood anyone better than her. We are like perfectly fitted puzzle pieces. We consider ourselves “partners in crime” and the best of friends.

Kally won’t always be here for me, nor will I always be here for Kally. I won’t live forever, and she’ll leave the nest one day to be an independent woman with her own life and family. Until that day comes, we’re better together.

## A New Fluffy Family Member

I started a fundraiser last year in hopes of one day acquiring a hearing dog to assist Kally both at home and in public. I managed to raise \$1,200 in donations from friends and family. While that doesn’t even come close to covering the costs associated with a hearing dog, I was very thankful, closed the fundraiser, and matched those funds with money I had in savings.

As opposed to using an organization that provides trained service dogs, we opted to acquire a dog to have trained as a hearing dog. We were looking for a small, hypoallergenic breed known for loyalty, excellent behavior, a sweet personality, and trainability. After months of research, we decided the best dog for her would be a Havanese. I used the money I set aside and matched from the fundraiser to get her puppy in October.

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Kally’s new dog, affectionately named Mochi (like Mocha), has settled in nicely with our family. We can already tell she’s the right dog for the job. As soon as she is fully vaccinated, we will hire a professional trainer to work with her to become the hearing dog Kally needs. Until then, we are both enjoying her fluffy cuteness, her playfulness, and teaching her basics like “sit” and “stay.”

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## Peas in a Pod

Kally and I consider ourselves very lucky to have each other. Our situation is rather unique as there aren’t many deaf or hard of hearing parents with deaf or hard of hearing children. In fact, according to my audiologist and research done by the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), more than 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents. That statistic is eye-opening, and we value and cherish our rare situation because we know we’re different. More importantly, we’re not alone. As long as we’re alive (or at least under the same roof), we’ll be side by side, overcoming life’s challenges together! **HL**

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# Hearing Dogs

## *What they are and how to get one*

**T**here are many different types of service dogs out there that help people with physical and mental disabilities. But what is a hearing dog? A hearing dog is a special assistance dog that is specifically trained to help people who are deaf or hard of hearing. They are capable of alerting their handler to sounds like doorbells, oven timers, smoke alarms, alarm clocks, ringing phones, and other important sounds that may not otherwise be heard by their handler.

We wanted to explore not only what it takes to acquire a hearing dog, but also what it takes for a canine to become a hearing dog, so we reached out to International Hearing Dog, Inc. (IHDI) who kindly provided much of the information within this article.

### What Does It Take to Be a Hearing Dog?

If you currently have or will be getting a dog in hopes of training it to be a hearing dog, there are lots of things to consider. A good hearing dog is identified not simply by breed, but more so by individual personality. Hearing dog organizations use dogs that are friendly, confident problem solvers who know how to take initiative. They must have great obedience, so they are appropriately behaved both in public and in the home. The ability to remain calm and confident under various circumstances, comfortable around common public accommodations (tile floors, elevators, shopping carts, overhead speakers, etc.) is imperative. Hearing dogs should be naturally curious, interested in sounds, and have the ability to directionally locate sounds. Although most dogs can hear sounds, not all dogs are especially aware of them, and hearing dogs need to be willing to investigate and alert their handler to sounds, even when they're relaxing (they're always on duty).

### How Do I Get a Hearing Dog?

The first step in finding a hearing dog involves doing some research. Start by looking for an organization that provides service dogs near you. IHDI recommends using an ADI (Assistance Dogs International, Inc.) accredited organization. As you do your research, you will find that each service dog organization has their own eligibility requirements and application process. Generally, however, you should be prepared to provide a thorough application detailing your lifestyle, needs, and level of hearing loss. Confirmation by an audiologist, references, financial information to ensure you can care for the dog, and sometimes an application or placement fee for the dog (ranging from \$25 to \$10,000) are required. Many organizations like IHDI don't charge, but those that do often have payment plans or other resources to help their clients. It's important to note that nearly all of these organizations operate on generous donations from their communities and are registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations. While individuals can train their own hearing dog, the use of these organizations or the assistance of a professional trainer is highly recommended. **HL**

**"Hearing dogs are a unique type of service animal, and IHDI is a unique organization. IHDI's work in training other ears to hear results in transforming dogs into hearing dogs that enhances a client's quality of life and strengthens communities. For individuals looking to learn more about the safety, independence, and companionship a hearing dog can provide, we encourage you to check out our website at [hearingdog.org](http://hearingdog.org)."**

**#TrainingOtherEarsToHear**

*—International Hearing Dog, Inc.*

