

“We must move beyond the ideal of a comfortable self-focused life, and answer the call to be an advocate for those who don’t have one.”

—Sandwell Advocacy

aidthesilent
advocating for the deaf and hard-of-hearing

Turning Disability Into Ability

BY EMMA FAYE RUDKIN



Emma Faye gets all the cuddles with baby Ellie at the Good Vibrations Festival.



Emma Faye and Jhojan share a quiet look of understanding each other as he waits for his new hearing aids from Aid the Silent.

Imagine simple sounds that most people take for granted: a refrigerator humming, morning alarms going off, birds chirping or water running. For some, these everyday noises are unheard, replaced by silence. At the age of three, I lost most of my hearing at a profound level.

As a small child, I didn’t realize I was different from others, but by the time I reached elementary school and throughout my middle school years, I became self-conscious about how I sounded. I was also uncomfortable with the physical manifestation of my deafness: the big blocks that were sitting behind my ears.

Self-Conscious and Struggling at 12

As I grew older, what I saw as my imperfections started to stand out. As a deaf person, I have struggled with depression for as long as I can remember. My earliest memories include pretending to be asleep at sleepovers because I could not lipread once the lights went out. I would concentrate hard all day to hear and lipread in the classroom and, at the end of the day, take home the textbooks to reteach myself the material. I was exhausted all the time and embarrassed by the way my speech sounded, and I would walk around holding my hair down by my face so no one could see my hearing aids. I was so behind other children in understanding concepts and ideas. I could not say the words “hamburger,” “computer” or “napkins” until I was 12 years old, and I did not know what a “thigh” was until I was 11. My world was overwhelmingly silent, and I fell behind developmentally.

A Radical Shift at 14

At the age of 14, I knew that life had to have purpose and that I had not been fully living mine. I was miserable, angry and lonely, and I felt strongly that the label “disabled” defined who and what I was. That summer, however, I signed myself up for a summer camp, and that week at camp radically changed me. My perspective shifted from allowing my disability to define me to allowing myself to redefine my disability as an ability—even at great strength. I started believing my deafness was the most beautiful thing about me because it shaped and molded me into who I was. My eyes began opening to the possibility that my deafness and my story could become a platform from which I could help propel other deaf people into fully living.

My father has spent most of his life as a trial attorney who handles many cases involving children.

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

—Anne Frank (1929–1945), German-Dutch diarist of Jewish heritage, author of *The Diary of a Young Girl*

One night, he started talking about a deaf baby in the foster care system; he was representing the child, but could not find the little one a home. I became heartbroken over a child I would never meet and for whom I would never be able to make a difference. I became adamant that something had to change, and I started thinking and dreaming again about starting an organization that would help people. My father and I passed ideas back and forth as my mother sat and listened to us. Later, she confessed that she thought my ideas were too ambitious and my plan would never work. (She owns an ad agency and her business mindset could not fathom the crazy dream I had trapped inside of me waiting to become reality.)

Inspired by a Dream at 18

I spent hours scribbling names and ideas on my notepad. At first, I wrote, “Aiding San Antonio,” but I soon decided that name was too limited, as it left no room for growth. Eventually, I settled upon “Aid the Silent,” and my mother bought the domain name, thinking it couldn’t possibly hurt. By my senior year of high school, I began researching statistics regarding the Deaf community to use on my website. It was then that the profound truth hit me: had I been born to a different family or on the other side of the tracks, I would not have access to all the resources I fortunately had available to me. My life would look very different. I started putting myself in the shoes of other deaf people with vastly different upbringing and experiences, and my heart began breaking for people whose language I did not yet know and for those I had not yet met.

Around this time, I also started teaching myself American Sign Language through online classes and quickly fell in love with the language and the culture it represented. I realized I was classified as a deaf person (although I was not yet part of Deaf culture) because my hearing loss was profound, and I experienced the same struggles and injustices as other deaf people. When I applied to the University of Texas at San Antonio, I officially became legally deaf. I knew I no longer wanted to be known as someone with hearing loss or be referred to as a person with a speech impediment. I wanted to be deaf.

Determined to Make a Difference

I longed to make a difference in the lives of deaf people, especially children and teenagers. By then, I knew the

The Good Vibrations Music & Arts Festival is a place where children and teens with hearing loss are celebrated and the Guests of Honors of the festival.



importance of early intervention and that a deaf child needs resources and access to total communication, or he or she will simply become another statistic. This longing, however, was still frustrated by the insistent voice in my head that suggested that I was incapable of accomplishing my goal, that I had not mastered sign language and that I did not even know another deaf person. The dream seemed so far from reach, but overnight my life would soon change forever.

This major redirection presented itself while I was walking the halls at my university. I received an email from the Miss Texas Organization, announcing the time and location of the upcoming Miss San Antonio competition, which was the official preliminary event prior to the Miss America competition. I was mortified to receive that email, as I didn’t consider myself the pageant type.

“The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.”

—Steve Jobs (1955–2011), American inventor/entrepreneur; co-founder/chief executive/chairman of Apple Computer

(After all, I worked for Young Life, a camping organization!) I could not apply makeup or style my hair to save my life. Confused, I approached my friends, asking who had sent the pageant my information. No one confessed. I finally asked my mother if she had anything to do with it. Little did I know that God was working in her heart and she, too, was beginning to believe that I could indeed achieve my dream. She admitted to signing me up without my permission. Initially, I was annoyed with her, but she said, “Don’t forget the big dream. Do not settle for the second-best dream.”

Making My Dream Happen: Aid the Silent

With hesitation, I attended the meeting about the San Antonio competition and found it to be different than I expected. The directors talked about the value of the contestants’ platform and how the organization focused on making a difference and propelling young women into their dreams and careers. I knew in that moment that God was presenting me with the Miss San Antonio pageant to help me launch my organization. “Aid the Silent: Turning a Disability into an Ability” became my platform.

Aid the Silent became internationally known in the first two months of its existence, and our partnerships outside of Texas grew quickly, as well. Families with deaf children all over America started applying for resources. In fact, our first applicants were not from Texas at all, which makes me thankful I never stunted the organization’s growth by naming it “Aiding San Antonio.” Among the first global connections we made was “Talking Hands and Voices” in the Philippines. The organization was a ministry for the deaf and school for young children who are deaf.

Comprehensive Support for Children and Teens

Our overall vision is to equip all children and teens in the Deaf and hearing loss communities with the necessary tools to reach and realize their full potential. We want them to experience life outside of their homes and comfort zones. The heartbeat of Aid the Silent is ministry with a Christian orientation, but our mission encompasses other components, in addition to ministry:

- **Deaf Awareness.** We raise awareness regarding the Deaf community through our 5K races, our Good Vibrations Music and Arts Festival and other deaf-accessible events. Our goal is to shed light on the injustices and needs within the Deaf and hearing



Hank & Emma Faye is a KLRN Digital Series geared toward children 4-8 years old, hosted by Emma Faye and her black lab, Hank. Set in her lively playroom, Emma Faye communicates with kids through lessons of sign language, social emotional development, kindness and friendship.

loss communities so that the hearing world can understand how to make a difference.

- **Deaf Research.** We support organizations that provide research funding for scientists who lead the fight in finding treatments and technological advancements for hearing loss through medical and technological research.
- **Deaf Education.** We support educational institutions and programs by providing funding to train deaf educators to teach deaf children and address their unique language issues and learning needs. The goal is for children and teens in the Deaf and hearing loss communities to reach their full academic potential.
- **Deaf Resources.** We provide scholarships so that children and teens in the Deaf and hearing loss communities who could not otherwise afford necessary equipment and services can gain access to them.
- **Deaf Ministry.** We sponsor children and teens in the Deaf and hearing loss communities to provide them with life-changing opportunities to attend Christian camps and events and hear and learn about Jesus.

“If you really want to be an advocate, start by listening to the people you claim to be advocating for.”

—adiaryofamom.wordpress.com

Outreach That Resounds Worldwide

The first Good Vibrations Music and Arts Festival successfully achieved our mission of bringing the hearing world and the Deaf and hearing loss communities together. We also accomplished our overall goal of being completely deaf-accessible, by offering eight hours of live captioning and interpreting, t-coiling, vibrating backpacks and an LED dance floor synced to the music. The split Jumbotron screen enabled members of the Deaf and hearing loss communities to participate in the center of the festival for the first time. Our Deaf and hearing loss community friends could go anywhere on the property and still participate; they were truly the guests of honor, although we invited a lot of our hearing friends to participate, too. People traveled from all over Texas, and a few attendees flew in from Seattle. One festivalgoer, a deaf blogger, came from the U.K. Many companies who had initially declined to become title sponsors later committed to smaller sponsorships, and a total of 39 sponsors underwrote the costs of the festival.

In our first year, 2,000 people attended, including 350+ members of the Deaf and hearing loss communities. The festival brought together 142 hearing volunteers and 14 deaf volunteers. The artisan market, food trucks and vendors totaled 45, and our food trucks included Deaf-owned businesses, which enabled hearing guests to experience placing their orders in an unfamiliar language. Ten churches raised awareness of the ministry for the deaf. Companies from the hearing loss industry, including eight hearing aid manufacturers and audiology companies and four implant manufacturers, also participated, which

initiated Aid the Silent’s ongoing relationships with these companies.

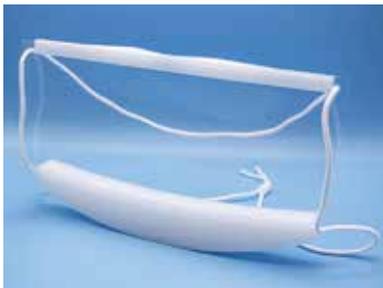
Aid the Silent is a place of hope for a lot of young parents who have recently discovered that their child is deaf. Often the first deaf person they have ever met is their own child, and they are completely overwhelmed. I have had the joy of working alongside my mother, Kathy Rudkin, who has become a well-known figure in the Deaf community because she cares for the parents so well. I am always with the children and teenagers, but she sits with parents all the time. Her inbox and Facebook messages are full of heartbreaking letters from young mothers who are up at 2 a.m., worrying and praying. My mother is up around 6 a.m. and always spends the first part of her morning responding to these young parents. She is helping so many walk through the places where she once felt so alone, and she shares so much hope with them.

It might seem as if my hearing loss was the greatest heartbreak our young family could have endured; but instead, it has become the greatest joy of our lives. My mother and I are able to look back on seven years of running Aid the Silent and marvel at all God has done. **HL**

Emma Faye Rudkin became profoundly deaf at the age of three and has spent her life turning her disability into an extraordinary ability. Visit Emma Faye Rudkin and Aid the Silent at aidthesilent.com. Emma was the cover feature for the November/December 2016 issue of Hearing Loss Magazine and was profiled in the spring 2021 issue of Hearing Life.

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