

I Am

Jennifer Thorpe not only has a hearing loss, she has a family too. Often people say it's the family's hearing loss, not just the person with it. Read how a wife and mother of five balances it all.

In March of 1976, when I was four years old, my parents, my two younger brothers, my grandparents, and I all climbed into a brilliant orange Volkswagen van and left central Tennessee, and headed for Virginia. As the story goes, I fell asleep in the backseat of the van, and half an hour later woke up almost totally unable to hear.

My parents were not completely taken by surprise, as they had already noticed that my hearing seemed to fluctuate quite a bit, but this was a defining moment. This time the loss was sudden and quite severe. The family trip to Virginia was cut short. Back home, visits with the hearing specialists started.

language classes. Then I continued the speech classes at school.

In second grade, I was assigned a teacher's aide. Mrs. Woods faithfully took notes, made sure we had good seating and reminded me to "pay attention!" for the next five years (rightfully so, as I had the attention span of a gnat when it came to school work and she earned her money honestly).

I graduated from high school in 1989 and decided to give college a try. At that time I had no strong aspirations to be anything, although I was most interested in special education and English. I just felt that college was something that I should do, and I did it. I didn't do it very well though because I was far too social, and uninterested in focusing on studies. After three semesters of a rather disappointing academic career, the school and my parents both strongly suggested that I take a break from higher education.

soon after that he needed a brother to play cowboys and Indians with, but instead, over the next few years, he was blessed with Katie, Rachel, Claire, and Ellie ... four beautiful sisters who did not share his interests at all.

Managing with Hearing Loss

As a small child, I learned that my hearing loss made me "different." When my family and I made the joint decision after my seventh grade year that I didn't need an aide anymore, I embraced that opportunity to attempt to blend into the "normal" world. I became very dependent on speechreading. I got more information from what I saw than from what I heard. If I couldn't see your face, chances were that I had no idea what you were saying.

I downplayed my hearing loss to my husband for years. I never asked for help unless it was absolutely necessary. As a result, he treated me as a hearing person, which frustrated me badly at times. He didn't seem to realize how much I struggled...but that was *my* fault, because I wasn't honest about needing help. Later when I suddenly lost all of my hearing and was left completely deaf for a period of time, that was a huge adjustment. He had to be my ears all the time.

From the day my babies were born, they slept with me in our bed. My husband worked nights when our son was born, and having him in another room where I couldn't hear him was too scary.

Bluffing Became My Game

I rarely asked for help. I would tell my high school and college teachers that I needed a seat close to the front so that I could hear, and that was about it. If I didn't hear something, too bad—I just didn't hear it. If I was in a group and someone told a joke, I became a pro at laughing just because everyone else was. I had a few friends in my life from kindergarten onward who knew I didn't hear everything, and if they or

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Simply Me

The search for the cause of the loss provided no answers; it was finally simply labeled as "idiopathic bilateral hearing loss"... a fancy way of saying that I was deaf in both ears and nobody really knew why. I had no hearing at all in my left ear and my hearing hovered around the 95 decibel level in my right ear. Within weeks I was fitted with my first hearing aid—a shiny silver Zenith pocket hearing aid.

Mainstream Schooling

I was already an avid reader and an extroverted child so several months later my parents made the choice to mainstream me into public school kindergarten. Every week for the next few years my mother took me to the Bill Wilkerson Hearing and Speech Center in Nashville for speech classes and sign

From the Altar to Baby Bottles

Less than a year later, I was invited to a Bible study by one of my friends. As the oldest of four, I had inherited my parent's minivan, so, for obvious reasons, I was very popular when large groups of young people wanted to go places. I drove my future husband to Bible study that night, and on the way home, he sat up in front with me and we attempted a conversation while I drove. Even with the overhead light on, the conversation wasn't very successful, but apparently that didn't deter him. Dicky and I started dating three weeks later, and three months later, in February 1992, we were married.

We were blessed with our first baby right away. Our son Will was born two weeks before our first wedding anniversary. We decided

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a family member were around, they would usually try to fill in whatever I didn't hear. However, when I was on my own, I became the master of the "bluff game" ...pretending I was hearing what was being said, when in fact, I really wasn't.

Even the most patient family members occasionally got tired of repeating the same thing over and over again and making phone calls when I couldn't. And since both my husband and I come from large families, there have been plenty of family gatherings where there were conversations that I simply could not keep up with. It was frustrating to ask "what did so-and-so say," only to be told, "remind me and I'll tell you later" or even worse, "oh, it wasn't anything important."

I have long hated big groups, and am still at a disadvantage in them. My best bet has always been, and still is, to have side conversations one on one. I occasionally try to position myself to catch as much as possible, but with the random nature of group conversation, it's hard to predict who will talk next, who will interrupt, etc.

While my hearing loss was no secret to the people that I spent the most time with, I was so caught up in my desire to not be different from those around me that I spent many years of my adult life simply not knowing what was going on. My interactions with people were often so difficult that it

was easier to just stay home. My in-laws bought me my first closed-captioned TV the first year we were married and when I wasn't playing with my new baby, I was watching that TV.

In 1998 I discovered the wonder that was the Internet and I was hooked instantly. The concept of being able to communicate so quickly and so accurately was a dream come true. With the Internet, even if you couldn't see people face-to-face, you never had to worry about missing a single word. Forget TV—I was connected to real human beings again. And the new friends that I met online didn't care that I couldn't hear, because on the Internet, it didn't matter. The printed word was the Great Equalizer.

A Downward Spiral

On the outside, it looked like I had it all...but deep down inside, I was very lonely. I had a loving husband, five beautiful children, a wonderful family, precious church friends, and a wealth of newly-acquired Internet friends. However, my husband worked a lot of hours, and I was at home with the children all day. I adored them, but my extroverted self craved grown-up company that I could discuss grown-up things with.

However, when I was with adults, communication was so stressful that I became tired of it pretty quickly. I started becoming more and more introverted and more reclusive. Finally, it all became too much. I allowed my self-

pity and depression to overtake me and started on a downward spiral that led to my eventual hospitalization for depression in the summer of 2005.

When I was released from the hospital, part of the doctor's orders was to see a counselor. My husband and I went together for close to a year. At one session, our counselor asked me how I felt about my hearing loss. "I'm fine with it," I said. "I don't have any problems at all with it."

He laughed and said, "I don't agree with you. I think you do have problems with it."

I ignored him. He didn't know what he was talking about, I thought to myself. He wasn't the one that had the hearing loss. He just didn't know. We never mentioned it again.

It's Really Not Coming Back

In March of 2006, I was at my parents' house one night for a Bible study. We had just arrived and I was talking to one of the women there. Suddenly I realized I could not hear her. It sounded like the battery on my hearing aid was dying.

I mentally counted the days since my last battery change. It had been less than 24 hours since the last replacement. Too soon, I thought. A bad battery perhaps? I excused myself and changed my battery. No change. Mildly shaken, I decided to try to stay calm and wait to see if it got better. Perhaps it's nothing more than fluid in the ears or a cold.



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My mother and I took a weekend shopping trip to Atlanta the next day. As we walked through the showroom at IKEA, I became increasingly frustrated at how hard it was to hear her talking to me, and in vain, I circulated through the remaining batteries in my purse. None of them worked. “It's not coming back, is it?” she asked. At that moment, it sank in: It's really *not* coming back.

I went to Robin, my audiologist, the following week and she confirmed what I already knew; I had experienced a significant loss in my only working ear. Now my audiogram was a nearly flat line of Os parading between the 100 and 110 decibel thresholds. I still had some hearing with my hearing aid, but what came through was muffled and indistinct.

The Cochlear Implant Option

Robin had first broached the topic of a cochlear implant in 1994 when I visited her for a new hearing aid. At that time, I refused to even consider it. As far as I was concerned, my hearing was not enough of an issue to warrant such a drastic change.

This time as we sat together in her office and looked at my audiogram, she said, “You need to rethink getting a cochlear implant.” This time, I was ready. Without hesitation, I said, “Who do we call?”

Within several days I had an appointment with Dr. David Haynes at Vanderbilt University Hospital in Nashville. I failed my evaluations, making me an excellent candidate. I was startled when he suggested that we implant my left ear first. “But it hasn't worked at all in 30 years!”

I said. He responded, “I'm not a gambler. You still have some usable hearing in your right ear. Let's do your left ear first and see how that goes. If it doesn't succeed, we'll see about doing the other one.” I agreed. My left ear was implanted in September of 2006.

The results were not what I had hoped. Rather than hearing sound, I felt an odd pinging sensation inside my skull in place of sounds. I attempted to adjust to that sensation for several months, but it was uncomfortable and overwhelming and I grew weary of it quickly and chose not to wear it. I still wore my hearing aid in my right ear every day, despite the fact that I wasn't hearing much out of it. It was better than nothing.

Distressingly, my right ear was alarmingly unstable. Some days I heard more sound; other days I heard less. One Sunday morning in March of 2007, as I sat in church trying to hear my brother-in-law preaching, I heard a loud, explosive popping sound. Within the next hour, all of my remaining hearing vanished.

I went back to Robin again, and she tested my right ear: the mid-frequencies had dropped another five decibels, and the lows and highs had disappeared entirely. I decided on an implant for that ear. Before I left, Robin pressed a piece of paper into my hand. “Take this home and fill it out,” she said. “You'll get a magazine every month, and there are support groups in the area you can be involved in.” I glanced down. Hearing Loss Association of America. I was unimpressed. I didn't *need* a support group.

“Just do it!” she said. So I did... more to please her than for myself.

HLAA...People Just Like Me!

Shortly after, when I was checking my e-mail, I had an invitation to the HLAA Convention in Oklahoma City in June 2007. Since I was still struggling with loneliness and frustration, I told my husband, “I want to go to this,” and he encouraged me.

It was a life-changing experience. I had never been around other people with a hearing loss before. I had no idea how liberating, relaxing and comfortable it was. I had no need to

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WILL (17)



KATIE (15)



RACHEL (12)



CLAIRE (9)



ELLIE (7)

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explain my hearing loss to others. They had been through it. I didn't need to feel embarrassment when asking someone to repeat themselves. After all, they asked me to repeat myself as well. If a battery died, it was understood that the conversation stopped so that nobody would miss out, and if it seemed like someone missed the punch line of a joke, someone filled them in so they wouldn't be left out. We understood each other. No explanations were necessary. I felt like I had found my crowd at last...people that were just like me.

Arriving back home, energized by my newfound friends, I threw myself into advocacy and volunteer work. In November of that year, I became a bilateral cochlear implant user with my right ear being implanted. Unlike my left ear with the implant, my right ear was an immediate success. Within two weeks I scored an amazing 97 percent on a comprehension test in my audiologist's office. I had never scored that high before—ever. It fueled my fire. The world needed to know about this!



Jennifer Thorpe and her husband, Dicky

On a side note, the left side implant was still bothersome. I actually had it re-implanted in August of 2008 on the off chance that there was an implant issue or a surgical positioning issue. It turned out to be neither of those things. Instead, it is an issue of a brain that simply won't wake up and work on that side. It happens sometimes.

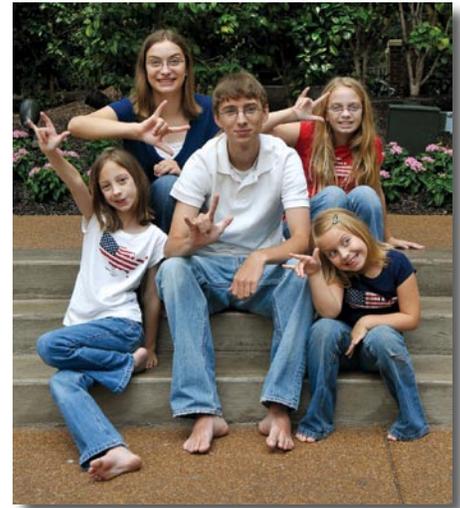
In addition to the lack of sound, wearing both implants actually caused severe balance issues for me. I suppose that's another thing that my brain just couldn't adapt to. Amazingly, as soon as I stopped wearing the left implant altogether, my balance issues went away.

I still recommend bilateral implants to anyone who wants to try them. I have seen so many wonderful results from the cochlear implant community; it just didn't work for me. However, I now hear better with the one implant than a lot of people hear with two implants. I can't ever remember hearing with two ears, so not having two ears now has not broken my heart. I am very grateful for one!

Balancing Life

For the next couple of years, advocacy and the HLA-Nashville Chapter became my life. It energized me and built my confidence. I felt I had found my calling...helping others deal with their hearing loss. Somewhere along the way, however, I started feeling like I was losing touch with what was most important in my life—my family. I had replaced time for my children with volunteer work and time for my husband with meetings and webinars. Life wasn't all about hearing loss.

My husband's and my communication was nearly nonexistent. The guilt I felt over not being there for my family started overtaking the pride I took in



The Thorpe kids signing "I love you" in ASL

my work. I had to sit down and re-evaluate where my priorities lay, and what I had to do to make my life what it needed to be.

I'd love to be able to say that I immediately balanced my life out and everything was instantly smooth and perfect, but the truth of the matter is that the balancing act is a work in progress. My goals are to be a strong Christian, a great wife and mother, and to make time for everything else as needed. I still feel that there is a time and place for advocacy and volunteer work, and I love the occasional opportunity to share the story of my journey to acceptance with someone else. I have a hearing loss, but it does not define me. I am so much more than a person who doesn't hear well. I am a Christian, a wife, a mother, a daughter, a friend, and an advocate. I am simply me. 🙏🙏🙏

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