

The Greatest Gift of All A Cochlear Implant Keeps on Giving...

By Suzanne Carol Fields

Among all the scientific and medical articles about cochlear implants, the personal narrative is perhaps one of the most helpful types of article to those thinking about an implant. At your request, we will share others' experiences, as they are available to us.

During my lifetime, I have received numerous thoughtful and sometimes extravagant birthday gifts. They have ranged from clay plaques with handprints which my sons made in kindergarten, to lovely jewelry and sleek sports cars from my husband. No matter how big or small, I deeply treasured all of the presents.

However, the greatest birthday gift ever, arrived two days before I turned 57. It was a cochlear implant, surgically inserted into my right ear by otolaryngologist, Scott W. Thompson, M.D., medical director of The University of South Carolina Cochlear Implant Team and affiliate of Midland Ear, Nose, and Throat Clinic of Columbia, South Carolina.

Giving Up A Career

For the last 40 years, I have been lip reading in order to understand oral language. A progressive sensorineural hearing loss left me with a profound hearing loss in both ears. Although I taught school with the use of two hearing aids for over 23 years, my disability became so severe; I eventually could

barely hear my students' voices. The strain of trying to listen to them became too stressful for me to continue in the classroom. I retired from my beloved vocation seven years earlier than expected.

At first not having students constantly around me was devastating. I missed teaching and I missed the students themselves, as well as the loss of daily camaraderie with my fellow teachers. Since I felt this void in my life, I decided to venture into heavy-duty gardening, another passion of mine. Because I have always been interested in landscaping, I devoted almost all my spare time to turning my yard into a colorful and enormous array of annual and perennial vegetation. I also volunteered to take on several gardening projects for my friends, including one large elementary school courtyard.

The principal, who is one of my closet companions, asked me to design, coordinate and implement a memorial garden in memory of all the Americans who perished in the attack on America, September 11, 2001. One year later, the Richland County Council honored me for my efforts in this project.

Gardening is a wonderful and creative outlet for a person with hearing loss. Being productive and creative in a lovely, silent, and natural environment is stress-free and peaceful. Even though I was not able to hear birds singing and butterflies fluttering, I could smell the fragrances and appreciate the beauty of the countless flowers, trees, and shrubs which encompass the property around our home.

My Extra Set of Ears

For most of our 36 years of marriage, my devoted and loving husband, Sandy, has been my auxiliary ears, interpreting phone messages, telling me the specials of the day which waiters would rattle off, relaying messages from my friends, and interpreting speech when conversation was taking place. My sons, daughter-in-laws, and close friends put up with having to repeat things to me over and

over again in order that I would comprehend what they were saying. The support I have had from these individuals is just too remarkable to describe. My friends and family members are rare jewels, on par with the finest Tiffany diamonds.

Serendipity at the Polls

Three years ago while standing in line to vote, a neighbor of mine told me how her son who had lost his hearing due to a brain tumor was now able to hear. She conveyed to me how he was surgically implanted with a cochlear implant which restored his hearing. AS you can imagine, my interest was piqued.

I went home and research this technology on the Internet. The material seemed to indicate that my type of sensorineural hearing loss could be helped. My husband arranged for an appointment for me with Dr. Scott W. Thompson, the surgeon who implanted my neighbor's son. After taking my case history and examining my ears, he immediately felt I might be a strong candidate for an implant.

In order for him to make an accurate diagnosis, I would have to have a series of x-rays of my ears and a few hearing tests. A series of audiological exams would determine if I would benefit from the latest technology in hearing aids or from a cochlear implant. The last step for me was a meeting with additional members of the South Carolina Cochlear Implant Team at The University of South Carolina Speech and Hearing Center to explain the mechanics of the interior and exterior portions of the implant and to determine if psychologically I was enthusiastic enough to pursue this course of implantation. Another session was then held by all the professionals involved for a final assessment of my candidacy.

After passing all the hurdles for the possibility of undergoing cochlear implant surgery, I was notified by Dr. Thompson that I qualified. One last meeting with my doctor would be scheduled to arrange the time and place of the operation.

On April 8, 2003, Dr. Scott Thompson performed the cochlear implant surgery at Palmetto Richland Memorial, Columbia, South Carolina. It was a two-and-a-half hour outpatient surgery and I went home the same day with absolutely no pain. During my entire recovery period, I did not have to take as much as one single aspirin to relieve discomfort. One month after my stitches healed behind my ear and right side of my head, I was hooked up for hearing at The University of South Carolina Speech and Hearing Center. "Hooked up" is another term for the first time they turn on the processor stimulates the cochlea to hear sounds.

Unbelievable as it may seem, I can now hear *everything*! I no longer have to read lips, and use closed-caption on my television set. I can hear popcorn popping in the microwave, birds singing, wind blowing, voices on the telephone, and even toilets flushing. I feel as though I have been born again.

I give my gratefulness to all the professionals who helped restore my hearing, as well as my loving family and friends who supported and loved me, with or without being able to hear their voices.

This was a birthday gift like none other.

Suzanne Carol Fields, M.Ed., is a member of the Hearing Loss Association from Columbia, South Carolina.

Check Out These Titles

The Road to Getting a Cochlear Implant Cochlear Implant Candidacy Process

By Jennifer Yeagle

www.hearingloss.org/magazine/latest.asp#road

Cochlear Implants and Health Insurance: Advocating for Full Access

By Donna L. Sorkin and John McClanahan

www.hearingloss.org/magazine/latest.asp#road

My Escape From Solitude

By Jeff Brantly

www.hearingloss.org/magazine/latest.asp#solitude