

My name is Beth Ward. I am a teacher in south central Kansas. I have a progressive, hereditary hearing loss, as do my father, two brothers, an uncle, my grandpa, and my daughter. My great grandpa was deaf. Obviously, I am post-lingually deaf. I received my cochlear implant in July of 2001, just weeks before beginning my first full-time teaching position. I spent the first month on the job trying to hear with just a hearing aid in my "better" ear. More about that later. =)

Now, more about my hearing loss. My doctors and audiologists are unsure of when my loss really began, but they assume it began at birth. I hid it very well. My parents began to suspect something when I was in junior high. The school audiologist (my mother's cousin) tested me at that time, and told my parents that I had a hearing loss. How much I had at that time, I don't know. I played the part of the dumb blonde well in school, passing off things I didn't hear as the trait of being an airhead. However, I was an airhead with a 3.85 GPA. I didn't want to admit that I couldn't hear. Nobody wants to be different, especially in high school. I was having fun. I was a cheerleader, a percussionist, a vocalist, editor of the yearbook. The last thing I wanted was the stigma of being hearing impaired and worse yet, the risk of being placed into special education. This was the 80's. Special education still consisted mostly of self-contained programs, especially in rural schools. You don't get much more rural than where I was raised.

I was not tested with the intent of getting hearing aids until I was a freshman in college. I remember calling home one night after a particularly frustrating day of classes and crying because I couldn't understand what the instructors were saying. I dropped all of my "basics" because the classes were so large that there was simply no way for me to cope. My "major" courses were much smaller, and I did fine in them for the most part, once again playing the part of the dumb blonde when I didn't hear or understand. I still did well in my music classes, except for jazz band. The improvisation was too much for someone with my degree of hearing loss. I needed to be able to follow the written music and the conductor rather than relying on my hearing to keep up.

My parents took me to the audiology clinic on campus at Wichita State University for testing, along with my younger brother. My older brother was not having as much difficulty at this time and no one realized that he also had a hearing loss. I don't remember the clinic where the hearing aids were fitted, but I do remember how horrible they sounded. I was fitted with two in the ear shells. I really hated those hearing aids. The distortion was so bad that I understood less with the aids than I did without them. They gave me the most horrible headaches I have ever had in my entire life. It wasn't long before they went back into the box and got stuck up on a shelf. (My daughter also has this problem with hearing aids, and will cry at the mention of wearing them.)

I didn't bring the hearing aids back out until after my daughter was born. I was 18 when I got the aids, and didn't really wear them until I was 23 or 24 years old. My daughter was over a year old before I started wearing them, I remember that because I remember the house we were living in at the time, and we lived there from the time she was 1-1/2 until she was 5. I believe she was 2 or 3 when I began wearing my aids so that I could hear her better. I saw another audiologist and tried to make the aids work. Over the next

several years, I saw three different audiologists in my quest for better hearing. I just wasn't happy with hearing aids. I hated them. I couldn't hear, and what I did hear was just background noise. I guess I should insert here that my type of loss is known as ski slope. My lower tones are good, but as the pitch goes up, my ability to hear it drops off sharply. My ability to hear speech sounds was virtually nil. Audiologists were telling me they couldn't do anything to help me. I was a musician and for the first time in my life, music sounded horrible to me. I quit playing the piano. I quit playing percussion. I stopped singing. I wanted a cochlear implant. I asked everyone who might be able to help me. I cried all the way home from an audiology appointment after being told that I wasn't a CI candidate.

Luckily for me, it wasn't long after that when my daughter's ENT referred us to the audiologists at Via Christi, St. Francis, in Wichita, KS. I had pushed him to test her hearing, which he resisted because she has good, clear speech. I knew, though, that I had good, clear speech up into my early 20's, so I kept after him. While speaking with the audiologist at Via Christi, I mentioned that I would really like to receive a CI. She immediately referred me to her coworker who provides AV therapy for CI patients. I met with Molly, and she reviewed my audiograms, tested my speech comprehension, and sent me to the Wichita Ear Clinic to meet with Dr. Kryzer.

That truly changed my life! I had struggled through student teaching, unable to hear well enough to be considered able to teach safely. I was, by this time, divorced, and trying to raise a child on my own. My parents were helping, but I needed my independence. I needed to be able to hear again. I needed to be able to have a job that would allow me to support myself and my daughter. I simply could not, would not, accept that I was deaf! Thankfully, Dr. Kryzer and his team wouldn't accept it, either. I went through all of the testing to determine my baseline levels of hearing and speech discrimination. I went through the CT Scan to ensure that I didn't have any physical reasons that would prevent me from receiving a CI. I reviewed information from KU medical center's implant team. I watched videos, read booklets, researched, and researched some more. The day that Dr. K told me he was ready to book my surgery date was one of the happiest, and scariest, days of my life. I was excited, but I also knew the risks involved. Maybe the hardest thing for me to accept was that I was going to have to shave part of my head for the surgery. I tried to make it easier on myself by getting a short haircut. It didn't help me, but it did make things easier for Dr. K during surgery.

Then it got scarier. I was asked if I would be willing to participate in interviews with a Wichita news crew to help get the word out to the public about cochlear implants. They wanted to interview me, Dr. K, and the audiologists before my surgery. They wanted to be there while I was being prepped for surgery to talk to me about how I felt that morning. They interviewed my mother and my daughter (as much as you can interview a shy 9 year old) before my surgery, and talked with Dr. K again. They also taped my surgery, and a post-surgery interview with Dr. K. The news crew was there when I received my processor and first mapping. I was able to answer their questions as well as I had with the hearing aids. This was all aired over several newscasts as I progressed through the steps.

I will admit, I was disappointed when my CI was activated. I expected things to sound so much better than they did. I knew my hearing wouldn't magically be restored to perfect hearing, but I thought it would sound better than what it did. I wasn't going to give up, though. I followed my audiologist's advice, and wore the processor for four hours a day for the first week, then gradually started wearing it for longer and longer periods of time. My first processor was a body worn processor. I did adapt to the sound, and made progress with it. However, my real progress started several months later when I received my behind the ear processor.

Ok, I will admit, at first I didn't like the sound I got with the BTE. I had grown accustomed to the BWP, and they didn't sound the same. Once again, my audiologist advised that I wear the BTE for four hours a day for the first week, and gradually increase the time that I wore it. After the first few days, I wore it all the time and have never looked back. I love my BTE! I've been wearing it for almost three years now, and continue to make progress. In the last year, I've started talking on my cell phone, and find that I do better with it than I've been able to do on the phone in 15 years.

My CI and my LIFE

As I said earlier, I began my first full-time teaching job just a few weeks after my CI surgery. I moved across the state for this job. I had wanted my independence, and now I had it! I was terrified! => Student teaching had been so incredibly difficult for me because I simply couldn't hear well enough to interact well with the students. The acoustics in the schools where I student taught were horrible. One school is over 100 years old, has plaster walls, tile floors, huge windows, high ceilings...an acoustical nightmare. The other school is one large room in a basement with classrooms created with room dividers. You know, the dividers used to make cubicles in offices. Grades pre-K through 6 were all in that one big room with nothing but a few flimsy dividers that didn't reach the ceilings to stop the sound from traveling. I felt as if I had been set up to fail, the settings for my student teaching could not have been worse. My cooperating teachers were very negative about my ability to be successful because of my hearing loss. I was very discouraged. So, although I was excited about the chance to teach, I was also terrified that I wouldn't be able to be successful.

The first month or so, before my activation was difficult. I was very lucky to have supportive administrators, and some absolutely wonderful paraeducators working with me. It also helps that my students did not speak much. They had autism and, for the most part, chose not to talk for various reasons ranging from other physical problems making speech difficult to severe autism. Following my activation, it was still difficult, but things steadily improved. The difference between my ability to communicate effectively with my students and paraeducators at the beginning of the year and the end of the year is like night and day. My CI gave me back the ability to be successful in my career.

I can hear my daughter when she talks to me now. It's still hard when I'm driving and can't look at her, or when she turns the TV or radio up so loud that I want to scream. But

it's better than it's ever been in her lifetime. She's learning to get my attention before she says something. She's also learning that when I say, "I'm listening," that I don't HAVE to be looking at her now, although speech reading still is a big part of my life.

Hearing with my CI is still a work in progress. I have my maps adjusted. I'm learning to request things that I think will help improve my ability to benefit from my CI. I'm learning the capabilities of my processors. Yes, I'm slow to do this, but better late than never. I know that there is still room for improvement. I want to be able to talk on the phone with more ease, although that may be as much psychological as anything at this point. For so long, the phone has made me tense, that it's difficult to relax and enjoy using the phone now so I don't try as often as I should. I still have little mini panic attacks before I pick up the phone to call someone. I'm working to get past that. Meetings are still difficult, especially meetings where everyone tries to talk over everyone else, or meetings with people who don't speak clearly, or I can't see them when they're speaking, maybe they have distracting features, etc. But again, this is something that is still improving. Right now, I'm looking at trying new programs for my maps, and a new type of microphone on my BTE. I hope that I never reach a plateau. I want to continue to improve every day. For right now, I'm not considering binaural implants. I still have enough hearing left in my unimplanted ear to allow me to hear low pitched sounds and very loud sounds when my processor is off. I don't want to lose that ability any sooner than I have to.

My journey through the trials and tribulations of being hearing impaired in a hearing world, along with the new experiences of being the parent of a hearing impaired child in a hearing world have led me to seek a second masters degree. This one will be in deaf/hard of hearing education. I want to take the experiences of myself and my family, both good and bad, and use them to help others like us to reach their full potential.

Beth