

# Cochlear implants 'a miraculous thing' for family

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Jer Loudenback stood within 3 feet of his son who was screaming in pain, but Loudenback couldn't hear him.

It was in that moment he decided to get cochlear implants.

This month, Loudenback, 51, and his sons, Jerome, 9, and Joshua, 7, will celebrate their one-year hearing anniversary.

"It's like I have a 10-month-old brain," Loudenback said through a translator.

Loudenback's native language is sign. Although he may never fully grasp speech, he is learning to distinguish sounds. Each day he progresses toward his possibly unreachable goal of being able to sing.

Jerome and Joshua have the advantage of being young. The boys are learning to read and can be understood by someone who lacks a background of speaking with those who are hearing-impaired.

The family moved from California to downtown St. Augustine in August 2003 after Loudenback took a job as a professor of sign at the University of North Florida.

Robert Kalkman, 52, the boys' other parent, called from downstairs to where they were playing on the second floor.

"What?" Joshua called back.

"Did you hear that?" Kalkman smiled broadly.

Six months ago, the boys wouldn't have heard him.

The decision for the three family members to get implants was not easy.

Loudenback and Kalkman decided to research the option because they wanted the boys to have every available opportunity in life. After three years of educating themselves on the idea, they contacted Med El, one of the three companies that provides implants, and began the life-long journey toward hearing and interpreting sound.

After family talks, the boys were so excited about getting implants that they skipped into the hospital. A couple weeks, later when they went back for the second implant, the excitement had not worn off.

For Loudenback, the decision was not as easy. He spent the first 50 years of

his life embracing deaf culture. He had moved past years of obstacles, barriers and frustration.

He said some people fear the implants almost as a "type of genocide."

However, Loudenback came to realize, they are what he wanted for his life now. His recommendation for people is to find what works best for their situation.

Loudenback, Jerome and Joshua were all bilaterally implanted, with each side costing \$85,000.

Kalkman described the hearing process his family members are experiencing.

First they have to attach meaning to sound, he said.

Music is one of Loudenback's passions. He smiles at the thought of it.

One night while he was downstairs, he thought he heard beautiful music. When he tried to turn the radio dial, he realized it was off.

He asked Kalkman about the sound.

"It was the dishwasher," Kalkman said as they laughed at the memory.

The second step is to filter sounds. People who can hear take for granted the ability to tune out certain sounds and focus on others, Kalkman said.

For Loudenback and the boys, the sounds can sometimes be overwhelming. Before the implants, something would have to be as loud as chain saw for Loudenback to hear it. Now, he can hear fingers scraping on jeans.

"So many of the noises overlap," Loudenback signed through a translator.

"And sometimes it's too much."

The last step is to be able to connect the sounds with spoken language. It is a matter of training the brain to recognize, interpret and vocalize, Kalkman said.

Cynthia Robinson, lead teacher at Clarke Jacksonville School for the Deaf, works with Joshua and Jerome. She said the change she has seen with the boys is "amazing."

"Joshua has a real knack for oral language," Robinson said. "He surprises me everyday with what he can comprehend."

She said Jerome is starting to put words together and has a "growing understanding of connected language."

According to its Web site, [www.clarkeschool.org](http://www.clarkeschool.org), Clarke Jacksonville "teaches deaf and hard-of-hearing children to listen and speak without the use of sign language." Clarke School for the Deaf in Northhampton, Mass., also

has programs in Boston, Jacksonville, New York and Philadelphia and has been in business for more than 130 years.

Robinson said the school's teachers work as a team to individualize learning plans for the children. For every month of teaching, they help the students gain two months of vocabulary and language with the hopes of "closing the gap with their hearing peers," Robinson said.

The choice of cochlear implants is "time sensitive," Robinson said. She wants parents to be aware of their choices early because if implants are what they want, it is easier for children to adjust and absorb the hearing world before they are 4 years old.

Jerome and Joshua are constantly learning and are catching up quickly. Label cards sit on furniture throughout their home. Joshua picked up the cards and read them clearly to demonstrate his new found ability to read.

He smiled as he sat with Kalkman to read a song.

"It's really a miraculous thing," Kalkman said smiling at his son.

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