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Her Turn To Dance Transcript

PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT: Monday, 6 October , 2003

WALLY LEWIS: G'day, I'm Wally Lewis, and I've played a game or two of rugby league in my time. But tonight's story concerns something more personal. My beautiful daughter Jamie-Lee was born profoundly deaf. But eight years ago some extraordinary medical technology came to her rescue and today she lives her life just like any other 13-year-old. But tonight's Australian Story is about Mischelle Edmunds whose life has also been transformed in amazing and unexpected ways.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: This group of people here at the rehearsal for my wedding tomorrow, they've brought me here where I am today. And without them I can't imagine what my life would have been like. Karin came into my life when I was at just about rock bottom.

KARIN ORPHEN: Mischelle was a very, very clever lady, but she was delivering pizzas and cleaning other people's houses because she couldn't hear.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: Karin is part of getting me here. She's had a lot to do with me having the confidence in myself to know that, yes, I'm a worthwhile person. That I am entitled to be happy. I'm entitled to find someone I can be happy with.

MARILYN BUTCHER: I know the hardships of being a single parent, being one myself. To have the responsibility for herself, for her children, and not having that hearing.

TAMIS CHARLTON: No-one would give her a chance to actually prove that she was smart. Mum's deafness didn't hold her back. It was the people around her that held her back.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: My mum, of course, encouraged me when I've needed it. She's been there to give me that push, that extra push, when I've really needed someone to do that. This wonderful man, Tony, that I'm marrying tomorrow is marvellous, and that's a story in itself. One of the first things I remember is my grandmother singing. It's something I always wanted to do. At I guess age 3 or 4, I could still hear enough then, I never really did know that I was deaf. You don't know you've got something wrong as a child unless someone tells you.

I thought the other kids were liars. They told me things they could hear, and I could never hear them. Things like the game Chinese whispers. People used to whisper and I could never hear what was said when they whispered. I thought they were mucking about. And the kids really didn't realise that I had a hearing problem. I guess they just gave up and didn't want to play. So I was very lonely as a child.

I always did well at school, even before my hearing impairment was picked up. And lip-reading was the way I was getting by. So it was just something I picked up naturally as a survival technique. It wouldn't have been until I was 7 the school nurse told my parents that I was deaf, that I had a hearing problem. I never really considered myself deaf. I was hearing-impaired, yes, but I always considered myself a person who was hearing but couldn't hear.

KARIN ORPHEN: I couldn't think of somebody more deserving of a fairytale wedding as they've actually planned.

TONY EDMUNDS: She's been running off madly putting this dress together and I said, "I don't want to see it - surprise me on the day".

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: At high school I loved learning, but the social aspect was, oh, hell. It was just awful. I hated it. If anyone ever mentioned my hearing loss at all, I would burst out in tears.

DEIDRE HAWKINS: One girl used to pick on her all the time. I used to say to her, "Just walk away." I said, "You'll come out better...than her." I said, "They just don't understand what it's like to be deaf."

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: I guess they saw me as disabled. I used to get "deaf, dumb and stupid" a lot. So a lot of my high-school years were geared towards showing people that, yes, I might be deaf, but I'm really not dumb and stupid.

DEIDRE HAWKINS: Well, this is what I used to say to her - "You're deaf, "but you've got a good brain there and put it to use. "And it will be hard and you'll get knocks, "but you'll come out winning in the end."

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: I never had a boyfriend while I was at high school. Perhaps the guys didn't want the ridicule of the other people, asking someone like me out. I was a library assistant for the five years I was at high school. The library was a haven, in a sense. I used to go there to feel safe. A coping mechanism, yes.

DEIDRE HAWKINS: She came home one day and she said, "Mum, I'm not going to school. "Not going to school anymore." And I said, "I beg your pardon?" She said, "I'm not going back."

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: We had an interview with the careers adviser when I was in Year 11. I thought, "OK, I'd love to be a librarian." He said, no, I couldn't do it. And I asked him why. And he said, "Well, you're too deaf." How about I became a teacher for deaf children? He vetoed that idea, as well. He said, "Well, you're not deaf enough, "in the respect that you don't sign." I felt devastated. I couldn't stay at school. I felt I couldn't stay there, because there was no point. I couldn't do what I wanted to do, so I left. I ended up... I had a big argument with my father around about that time and I left and went to live with my aunty.

TONY EDMUNDS: Getting ready for the wedding day, Mischelle started to talk about this dream she had. She started to tell how she wanted the Old World dress, she wanted the horse and carriage, and she wanted an old historic church. And hopefully it will all come off beautifully on the day.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: Once I left school I think socially my skills picked up a little bit because people weren't quite so nasty in the real world.

MARILYN BUTCHER: I met Mischelle just after she turned 18. And she was probably more of a daughter, because she was about 10 years younger than me. But she was a great friend, as well, because we always went out together. Mischelle was struggling to get a job. She knew she needed to go out and work. She really wanted to. The hearing impairment didn't help at all.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: Every time I applied for a job, it didn't matter where it was, there was always something extra I had to do. I had to prove that I was capable of doing it. I had to prove that I wasn't dumb. So I started nursing when I was 17. I loved it.

DEIDRE HAWKINS: The sister in charge, she knew she was very good. She was very good at all the jobs that she had to do.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: My hearing was progressively worsening.

MARILYN BUTCHER: Mischelle was such an excellent lip-reader that nobody believed she was deaf.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: Unfortunately, 14 months into my training, the surgical component came into it. Once I got up into the theatre and the masks went across people's faces, that was it. I could not understand a word anyone was saying. Then I ended up standing up against the wall out of everybody's way, because I simply could not hear what people were saying, and it was a disaster.

I ended up going to the matron and saying, "Look, I'm sorry, but I can't do it."

DEIDRE HAWKINS: And the sister tried to talk her into trying it. But no. She said no. She said, "I'd be too afraid that I'd do something "and something would happen to a patient," you know.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: She said, "Look, you're gonna be one of my best sisters one day. "I really don't want you to drop down." And I said to her, "If you don't let me do it, I'll have to leave. "I can't stay in theatre."

KARIN ORPHEN: She hasn't had anything like that before. Nothing. If she picks purple with orange stripes, whatever she wants, she has. Because she really did it hard the first time.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: I met my first husband when I went to Perth. And my first child was born over there. When I lived in Melbourne I had my second child down there. Karin and I became very close. We were friends before my marriage ended.

KARIN ORPHEN: All mothers worry that they won't hear their children crying. For Mischelle it was a case of she couldn't possibly hear. But she was the best mother. It was just amazing. For Mischelle of course, as well as her hearing, her first marriage was pretty awful. Which would be an understatement. They...she did it very, very tough.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: There were a lot of issues that we all needed to try and work through that we couldn't do. My self-confidence during my first marriage was at an all-time low. The best I can say is that the marriage was a disaster for all concerned. The situation was so bad I couldn't stay there anymore. I couldn't subject my children to what we were being put through. So, I picked up my children, I picked up my handbag and I walked out. And that was it. I never went back. I used to always think, "I'm a terrible mother. "I've put my children through all this." And... ..you know, it was hard. It was really hard. So...having Karin there to help me out, it was a lifesaver. It really was. I left Melbourne in 1993 to come back up to Newcastle. All my family were here, my mother was here.

BENN CHARLTON: Seeing her get the knock-backs at the jobs she applied for, there was just kind of a put-down for us, because we knew that she could do more in life.

TAMIS CHARLTON: They don't give you a chance to prove your potential. They don't say, "OK, well, you might be deaf, "but that doesn't matter, we'll still help you anyway." They were, like, "Nah, you're deaf, that's it, you can't do anything."

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: My hearing loss was just getting worse. I was having so many problems with it. I could never have survived without my mum. My mum came to all the doctors I went to, and I ended up going to one in Sydney who did a lot more tests and he came back and said, "Yes, you're a perfect candidate." And I said, "Candidate for what?" And he said, "For a cochlear implant." And I said, "I'm not here for a cochlear implant. "I wanted you to fix my ear so I could put my hearing aid back in".

DEIDRE HAWKINS: She was reluctant. I said, "Well, you can't hear, and what are you going to do?" She said, "I don't know." I said, "Well, you have to take the gamble."

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: I thought, "I'll have to have an operation. What if it doesn't work?" Mum's saying, "Oh, but it'll be wonderful. "You'll be able to hear, get a job. "You'll be able to use the telephone." And I actually got angry with my mum and I said, "How do you know? "It's not you that's having a hole drilled in your head. "Why are you saying this?"

DEIDRE HAWKINS: But I didn't have any doubt with her. She said, "Mum..." I said, "Mischelle, this is what you've got to do." I said, "You'll be right!" I said, "You will hear, "and don't even think that it won't work, "because," I said, "it will." So this is what we done.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: So I got to theatre and the doctor said, "Hi, Mischelle. How are you?" I went, "Oh, I'm fine, but just remember if I die, "I'm an organ donor and you can take everything." And he said, "You're not gonna die. Don't say that," you know. It takes about three weeks after the operation before you can actually have the implant switched on. The most prominent thing I can remember thinking was, "This thing better work or SOMEBODY'S gonna be in BIG trouble." There are 22 electrodes in the implant itself that need to be switched on. As she turns one on you tell her the very softest sound you can hear and the very loudest sound that's comfortable for you, and she has to do that 22 times. Now, I had my mother and my friend Marilyn and my two children were there with me.

BENN CHARLTON: We initially had no idea what was going to happen when she had this thing switched on.

TAMIS CHARLTON: It was basically like, "She mightn't be able to hear anything. It's just a process of sending impulses in there, and if she can hear, she can hear.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: I was nervous, scared, that it wouldn't work. And then at the end of it she said, "Now I'm going to switch you on." And everyone went quiet. And then I could hear... (Breathes exaggeratedly) I could hear everybody breathing, you know. And I really didn't realise that you could hear people breathing.

BENN CHARLTON: When she got it turned on I noticed that she was crying, and I looked at Tamis as if to say, "Why is she crying?" Then I looked at Nan and she was crying... And then Auntie Marilyn was crying.

TAMIS CHARLTON: We'd just always known Mum deaf. We'd never known her any other way. She was able to hear us for the first time. She was able to hear other noises. It was funny - on the way home in the car, every time we changed lane Mum's going, "What's that noise?" and Auntie Marilyn's, like, "What noise?" She's, like, "Change lanes again." She changed lanes and hears this tick, tick, tick, tick. It was, like, "What is that?" And everyone's, like, "What noise? What are you talking about?" It was, like, Auntie Marilyn put the blinker on and she's, like, "Does the blinker make a noise?!" And we're, like, "Yeah." She's, like, "I just thought the light flashed. "I never knew it made a noise!"

DEIDRE HAWKINS: I knew it was going to be a different life. She could get on with her life.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: About six months after I had my implant, I went up to pick her up from a singing lesson. And when I walked in all I could hear was this glorious voice, and I went in and I sat down and I listened.

TAMIS CHARLTON: I've always sung, and she'd always come to concerts and she'd

always cheer me on as a mother would, and she was always proud. She never, ever heard that I was actually singing. The first time that Mum heard me sing, she bawled her eyes out.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: It was just so beautiful for me to finally hear her voice.

TAMIS CHARLTON: I didn't so much take that for granted, but it was just, like, "Don't cry. I don't want you to cry 'cause I'm singing."

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: Cochlear always need recipients to help them out with research.

DEIDRE HAWKINS: Mischelle used to go and do testings for them with all the new upgrades on the implant, and Mischelle needed a job.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: I would say to the audiologist, "Do you know if there's any jobs going?"

DEIDRE HAWKINS: We went down to a big dinner, the 30,000 implant in Sydney.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: And one of the guest speakers there was Jack O'Mahony. He's the CEO of the company.

DEIDRE HAWKINS: And I said to Jack O'Mahony, I said, "Listen," I said, "Mischelle needs a job." He looked at me. I said, "She needs a job." I said, "There must be something there at Cochlear that she can do."

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: I got a phone call from one of the audiologists. She said, "How would you like to visit Japan?"

DEIDRE HAWKINS: And she said to me, "Mum." I said, "Yeah?" She said, "I'm going to Japan." And I said, "You're going where?" And off she went to Japan, and now she travels the world.

JUDY MITCHELL: She was a great advocate for the technology, a wonderful proof statement on how well it works, and people were so impressed that the obvious thing for us to do was put her on the payroll. For a woman who didn't hear properly for decades, she is an amazing communicator.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: I do have to emphasise that not everyone does as well as I do. I'm very lucky that my implant has worked so well for me.

JUDY MITCHELL: So why does communications work for Mischelle? Because she loves people.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: I went out to the dance classes because I love to dance and because my brother dragged me along. So it was a bit scary. OK, I had my implant, but I could never imagine that anyone would want to look at me again.

TONY EDMUNDS: There was this gorgeous blonde who'd show up every now and again, and at the time I didn't realise that she was travelling the world.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: And there was one fellow in particular and I thought, "Oh, I really want to dance with this guy. He's really nice." Later on I was sitting with a girlfriend and when I looked up, this fellow was dancing with another woman and they were having a really good time, and I thought, "Oh, no". I said to her, you know, "Are they going out?" And she went, "What? Tony and Sue? Oh, no - Sue's got a partner."

TONY EDMUNDS: Carol came up to me one night and said, "Guess who's sweet on you?" And I just lit up. I thought, "I don't believe it." I'd been keen on Mischelle for some time but always too scared to ask her out. On the Friday I thought, "I'm gonna ring her. I'll ring her today." And it wasn't until mid-Monday afternoon. I was at work, I went into

my office, shut the door and rang her.

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: He said, "How would you like to go out for dinner and a movie?" And I went, "Oh, I'm going to Austria tomorrow to work. "I'm going for 12 days and I haven't even packed my suitcase! Oh, no!"

TONY EDMUNDS: And her voice sort of quivered a bit and she said, "I'd love to." And I thought, "Oh, crikeys."

MISCHELLE EDMUNDS: So we ended up sitting in a cafe for four hours and we just talked and talked and talked, and it was wonderful.

TONY EDMUNDS: And two hours into that conversation I fell in love and could have married her on the spot.

KARIN ORPHEN: I feel so proud of her and happy to be part of it because I've seen this journey she's taken from an 18-year-old girl to now. She never looked at herself as being beautiful, and I could see the inner beauty of this girl.

MARILYN BUTCHER: Because of her hearing impairment she's had to put in more effort to make the journey a lot easier for herself. She's really put in the time and the effort and the battles. And now to come to this point where she's marrying this really nice man, to see her come to that point in her life is... ..I'm just feeling so great and honoured that I'm there to celebrate this very special day.

PRIEST: And so it is with great pleasure now, Tony and Mischelle, that I pronounce you to be... They've been waiting since yesterday. I pronounce you to be husband and wife. Tony, you may kiss your bride.

DEIDRE HAWKINS: I have seen her through rough times, but I knew that potential was there for Mischelle that once she got the hearing, things would change for the better. It was gonna be a great life for both her and Tony

CAPTION: Mischelle Edmunds says she has just bought a piano and will soon have her first lesson. Singing classes may follow ...