



**W**hen Lara and Mike Wall remember the first time they met four years ago, he still blushes and she giggles. Then she swirls her hands around her stomach and flaps her fingers to illustrate the serious case of butterflies she felt the day she flew from Lexington, Kentucky, to Los Angeles, with a suitcase of faith and a hunch in a handbag, to meet the man she had only known online.

Within hours of her landing, the two were sitting on the beach watching the sunset and knowing, in the corner of the heart that knows, that this was indeed a beginning. "We had our first kiss and just knew," recalls Lara.

Sure enough, for Lara and Mike, who married last July, the risk paid off. They still look the picture of newlywed love. They have whole conversations with just their eyes and hold hands under the table. Their lives are pretty close to perfect. He has a good job as an integration and test engineer for a naval

weapons company. She's setting up the home they've just built together in Ridgcrest, California. They have close friends and the love of their three children from prior marriages.

There was just one thing missing.

Lara and Mike were deaf. Profoundly so. If a 747 jet took off beside them, they wouldn't be able to hear it. Lara, now 36, was only six months old when a high fever destroyed her hearing. Michael, 41, was a toddler when a bout of meningitis left him deaf. Until recently this didn't matter much. Like many people who are born deaf or become deaf early in life, they adapted beautifully. "In the world of the deaf, deafness is not viewed as a handicap but a culture," says Mike, who, like Lara, shared his story through an American Sign Language interpreter.

Both attended schools for the deaf, held jobs and raised hearing



**Lara, with Mike by her side, is astounded as she is gradually introduced to the world of sound.**

children. Lara's first marriage was troubled, however, and ultimately her father stepped in to help with her daughter, Krystle. When Lara met Mike in an online deaf chat room in April 1998, her mind was

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