

I CAN HEAR YOU

CONTINUED

work together and make hearing external sounds possible.

Lara goes first. Jones reassures her that feeling vibration or dizziness is normal, then places the magnet and hearing device behind her ear. The magnet adheres to the implanted device beneath the skin. Apprehensive, she presses the magnet to her head with one hand and holds Mike's hand with the other.

The first thrill comes when Lara hears signal number one. "I think I'm hearing a little," she signs, her face looking bewildered. "Yes! I can hear!" Her face reddens with excitement, her eyes shine and spill over with tears. "Oooh! That's really cool. I hear, one, two, three, four sounds."

"Yes, that's quite right," assures Jones, who seems to be almost as delighted, though he's done this 50 or 60 times.

"Oh, I'm so pleased! It's working!"

Once all the electrodes are activated, Jones asks for silence. Lara wants Mike's voice to be the first sound she hears. Both of them learned rudimentary speech in school, though they rarely talk. Now, Mike tells her that he loves her with his voice, which sounds tentative and comes from far back in his throat.

"It's so amazing! I heard your voice, and it's beautiful," she signs. Now she's openly crying, and it's her daughter's turn. "I love you, Mom," Krystle says. Then her father says, "You did it!"

"I can hear everyone's voice, and it sounds like I never expected! I didn't know voices were so different."

She laughs, then laughs at the sound of her laughter. Everyone in the room is smiling. Some are cry-

ing, too. Meanwhile, Mike sits with a puzzled smile in his silent world, as he watches his wife, who has crossed over.

After lunch, the small gathering stands silently, waiting for Jones to reset the computer for Mike. "It's so quiet," Lara observes, drawing a wave of chuckles. Then Jones fires the first electrode, then the second and third, and each time, Mike, his eyes as bright as fireworks, says, "Wow! Wow! Wow!"

Then it's his turn to hear Lara speak. In a voice not quite used

to expression, she says her best "I love you."

"I love you, too," he says. They kiss. Cameras flash. Then Mike signs: "I'm too happy to speak."

Another World Opens

That afternoon, the couple headed to the beach. They stood on the shore and heard the ocean, the wind, the gulls, but they couldn't tell which sound was which. Later, they went to dinner and discovered how noisy a restaurant can be. In the car on the drive home, they heard the wind rushing in an open window, the click, click, click of the turn signal, and the shocking sound of a siren.

At home, Roxie, their miniature dachshund, ran into the yard barking. At first Lara thought the "weird sound" was an alarm that kept going off. Finally, after checking the microwave, the fax, the refrigerator and the clock, she figured out it was Roxie, and yelled, "Roxie, stop!" The dog stopped barking. "But she looked at us so strangely," said Lara, "Like, 'How did Mom and Dad know?'"

Within just a few days, they could tell the doorbell from the

phone. They were startled by the booming of thunder and pounding of heavy rain. They've begun tuning in to the music their daughters like to hear, and both of them are increasingly amused by the fast-track melodies of the girls' adolescent voices.

As for spoken words, they are beginning to understand a few, but agree that this will take time. "We're both really motivated," says Mike. "Regardless of whether we ultimately understand speech, hearing will still be positive." At this, Lara smiles and nods. "It will be one more thing we enjoy together," she adds.

At night as they lie together in their bed they realize how darkness makes the subtlest sounds more pronounced. Their very breathing and the beating of the other's heart can sometimes keep them awake. But gradually, they fall asleep. Listening. **WD**



Now it's Mike's turn. Using his computer, the audiologist makes adjustments to the frequencies.

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