

“I CAN HEAR CLEARLY NOW-THE QUIET IS GONE”

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Since I was born, I have been hard of hearing possibly due to my premature birth. At only 3 pounds, I spent my first month in an incubator. In the 50's, when preemies did not have the advantage of the technology we have today. I wore two hearing aids most of my life. This, of course, is a serious handicap in our society. I have a very loving family and they have been extraordinarily supportive of me all of these years. Growing up, the hearing aid in my left ear became progressively less effective and I became profoundly deaf in that ear, but continued wearing an aid in my right ear.

In 1993, I was recommended to see Dr. Joseph Farrior III in Tampa, a renowned otolaryngologist, specializing in cochlear implants. He suggested that I have a Cochlear Implant (CI) in my right ear (the good one). I did not want to possibly jeopardize my only hearing ear with surgery, so he suggested that I wait until technology improved, as it was advancing. I had the MRI done on my head and to my surprise that the cochlea was normal size. So I waited.

Fast forward to 2014. At the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) convention in Austin, TX, I visited the Phonak booth. I asked about the new technology with the digital hearing aids. I was told the Naida model I had was the best – that there was no stronger aid than that and no upgrades or improvements were in sight. But I had hoped to be a guinea pig for any newer hearing aids. He advised that I investigate a Cochlear Implant. I was stunned at that suggestion from a hearing aid specialist, as that meant I might not need them any longer.

At that point, I went to 3 different CI booths to speak with the various representatives. I spent a lot of time with the MED-EL representative, Margarita Sweet. I attended the Association of Late-Deafened Adults (ALDA) convention, where I met Dan Schwartz, who convinced me to meet with Dr. Loren Bartels, who is well known in the field of CI and suggested I see him ASAP before he retired.

My first meeting with Dr. Bartels was in December, 2014. He advised that I needed to go through a series of tests. He discussed the CI in the left (bad) ear, where the hearing aid gives no benefit. I was quite doubtful that the procedure would help me. I could not grasp how the CI would work better than a hearing aid. I returned for the tests at the beginning of 2015. My sister, Donna, went with me for support to hear clearly all of the particulars. I would need a hearing test, a balance test for vertigo, and more. He strongly suggested that I had to get juvenile and adult pneumonia shots before the surgery. I would need adult pneumonia next year also to avoid meningitis.

On sentence testing, I scored 29 % in the right ear, 0 % in the left ear, and 18% in both ears. It showed that I had 95 decibel (db) loss in the right ear and 115 db loss in the left ear. I met Kayla, an audiologist, who gave me materials on all three Cochlear implant companies. She suggested that I go with Advance Bionics. Later, the doctor suggested that MED-EL after he received the results of all the tests.

I had to come back for another type of test where they put electrodes on my head, to see if the hearing and balance nerves would respond.

The vertigo test involved wearing special glasses and has the eye follow the lights on the panel. Sometime the light would move faster or slower on the panel. After that test finished, the vestibular technician would flush warm water into the ear and then cold water into the ear to see if I got dizzy. It was a weird feeling but no dizziness.

I had to go back to the hospital to meet with the anesthesiologist to see if I had sleep apnea and complete my blood work.

I was going to schedule it for March, but flying is prohibited for at least a month following surgery. I scheduled the surgery for May 12, after my April Salt Lake City genealogy group trip.

May 12 - My sister Donna delivered me to Tampa General Hospital at 5 a.m. for the 7 a.m. surgery. After all of the pre-op preparations, I finally got to the operating room. My biggest problem was that doctors and nurses wear face masks and I can't lip read through them to hear the gossip about me, prior to the anesthesia. Bummer~~!! Forty-five minutes later I woke up in the recovery room and asked the nurse how many stitches – I had seen some CI surgeries with a whole string of them – but she held up only two fingers. Relief!

I had a huge plastic cup over the left side of my head where they implanted the CI under the skin. I had to keep it on for 48 hours. Pain and nausea medicine, were prescribed but fortunately never needed either of them. I was feeling great at this point.

After Donna brought me home, I slept the rest of that day. No pain and no sickness, for which I was grateful. I only had to clean the incision for 2 weeks – tingling at the wound was a sign of healing

May 26 – It has now been two weeks since the implant. I am to return for “Activation Day”, where they turn on the processor. My California sister, Diane, arrived in time to accompany Donna and me for the activation and mapping, where they turn it on. Diane videotaped the whole thing. One thing – I could not wear my hearing aid in the right ear for one month, so that my brain gets used to the sound from the CI.

When the processor was activated, I could hear the beeps, as they adjusted the volume. They had a chart for me to point at to indicate the level of sound I could hear,

from “Quiet” to “Too Loud”. At some point, my eyes left the chart. I looked up and noticed that both of my sisters were crying at the miracle they witnessed of me being able to hear after 30 years. My hearing has increased from a 100 (very deaf) to just below 30, a remarkable improvement. The hearing scale goes from -10 (very acute) to 120 (profoundly deaf).

Two weeks later, my nephews met with me for the second mapping, They were fascinated with the technology and software for mapping – as they have electrical engineering and computer backgrounds. My second mapping shows my hearing to be around 20, which is very satisfactory. I received copies of photos of the surgery, which was very interesting.

Observations: For the first time, I can hear the turn signal in the car, the tire friction on the road, and the ADT alarm connection magnets in the door. I can hear the computer printer a room away, my car keys jangling, the silverware as it touches the plates and bowls, the birds chirping, and my keyboard clacking and more (you can’t talk behind my back any longer!). The most annoying sound is the toilet flushing!!! I am looking forward to learning new sounds.

This is all so amazing. However, the CI battery only lasts two days – but they gave me a one-year supply!! I am waiting for the FDA to approve the re-chargeable battery for the United States. As new technology comes out in the future, the CI that I have will be forward compatible and not backward.

The new hearing aid for the left ear is connected by a short wire to a 50 cent size magnet that adheres through my skin to the internal processor. This makes it all work. When I remove this device, and have only my regular right ear hearing aid, the loss of sound is huge. I am totally addicted to the two of them now. I am stunned at it all.

Few problems – if I get too close to anything steel - the magnet whips right off my head – on to the car, the refrigerator, etc. I find this very funny. I need to be careful how I receive hugs. I need to hug people from the right side and not the left side as some time the CI falls off.

At night, I don’t sleep with the processor (external device) or the hearing aid, so I enjoy the sound of silence. The only thing that wakes me up at night is the lighting when there is a thunderstorm.

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And I am now progressively improving CYBORG! Stay tuned.