

Hearing MAGAZINE Loss

May/June 2008

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

**Big Changes Are Coming
to Broadcast TV**

**Listening to Music Through
a Cochlear Implant**

**Hearing Loss
and Denial**



Abbie Cranmer
Chronicles of a
Bionic Woman

By Abbie Cranmer

Join Abbie Cranmer, 28, on her personal journey from the day she lost her hearing to when she finally heard again with a cochlear implant.

**February 22, 2007:
The Day I Lost My Hearing**

My weary eyes started to flutter as the anesthesia began to evaporate. My eyes dreaded the throbbing pattern of fluorescent lights but soon began to focus. A monotonous wailing crept in my head. My body lay limp. Time lingered to a standstill until a nurse with smiling eyes caught my gaze.

I tilted my heavy head toward the nurse as she wrapped me in blue cotton sheets. The cool fabric sent shivers down my arm but then a hazy face appeared alongside my bed. It was the face of my anesthesiologist. He held a small plastic container in the air. I wrestled my arms free from the cotton cocoon as I mouthed thank you. I began to fumble with the lid. Once open, I gingerly picked up my hearing aid and placed it in my ear.

I anticipated the sounds of monitors beeping, phones ringing, and people speaking. Alas, the only sound I heard was vexatious wailing. I adjusted the volume as the anesthesiologist spoke but it was pointless. I could not hear him. *I could not hear anything.* I promptly checked my switch to see if it was on T-coil.

I wobbled to my last hope, my backup hearing aid. I sat on the edge of my bed. My teeth chattered as I placed a fresh battery into it. I placed it in my ear and prayed. Tears fell into my hand when my prayer wasn't granted. It was then that I realized I was truly in a world of silence.

perplexity while mine filled with despair. I noticed that his lips moved with such simplicity as he enunciated each word. My surgeon joined him by the bed and began recapping the operation. I cut him off, "I can't hear anything!" He cocked his head to one side, bewildered. He looked at me like a dog looks when their leash is wrapped around a pole.

"You can't hear anything?" he said. Did he lose his hearing too? I studied his face for reassurance that this was a common side

my cell phone and tried to call my voicemail and made a wish for the tiniest iota of sound. How could I have just used this phone a few hours ago to tell my mom I loved her? In the car, the windshield wipers swept and the radio played, but all I felt was the engine's vibration through my feet.

Fifteen minutes later we pulled into my driveway. My mom opened the door and greeted me with concern in her eyes. They were the eyes that only a mother can give; if they could switch places, they would do so in a heartbeat. I wobbled to my last hope, my backup hearing aid. I sat on the edge of my bed. My teeth chattered as I placed a fresh battery into it. I placed it in my ear and prayed. Tears fell into my hand when my prayer wasn't granted.

It was then that I realized I was truly in a world of silence.

**June 5, 2007:
You Will Be Assimilated**

I was diagnosed with sensorineural hearing loss in both ears when I was four years old. No one has a clue what happened to my hearing but I was a sick child the first couple of years: anemia, E-coli, tonsils removed, adenoids removed, and who knows what else. They plopped a set of

Chronicles of a BIONIC WOMAN

Nothing. I switched to my second program.

Nada. I removed my hearing aid and the nurse turned toward the squealing aid, which ruled out a dead battery. I placed the hearing aid back into my ear and felt a faint click of battery compartment close.

Zilch! A string of sweat formed behind my ears. I sat there waiting for the hospital ruckus to fill my ear but there was nothing. Something wasn't right.

"I can't hear anything," I said through a raw throat.

"You can't hear?" the anesthesiologist said, his eyes filled with

effect. He said, "This has never happened before." I started sobbing uncontrollably inside. Why me, I thought. Why now? The surgeon left me to grieve. I was left alone in a world that was not my own.

A single blood drop dripped from my nose.

The gurney moved me down the hallway. What happened to me? Anesthesia? Swelling? Allergic reaction? All I wanted was my deviated septum fixed. I had a headache and I wanted to go home, back to my bed, hearing the sounds that I was used to hearing.

I got into my truck and noticed it was beginning to rain. I grabbed

hearing aids in my ears and gave me a license to fiddle around with dials, switches and batteries.

My sudden hearing loss wasn't a fluke like I was hoping it to be. I still can't hear worth beans. I'm left with two options: to wade through life hearing nothing or get a cochlear implant (CI) evaluation. I chose the latter. The evaluation was spread out over a couple of months. Between the results of the comprehensive hearing test, a CAT scan, an MRI, and a balance test, my surgeon told me today that I am a candidate and either ear is up for grabs.

continued on page 12

Bionic Woman

continued from page 11

From what I understand, they knock me out with the happy juice, make an incision behind the ear, drill a little well in my skull for the magnet to sit so it does not float all over my head. Then the doctor will proceed to drill a tiny hole through the mastoid bone to insert the tail into the cochlea, the audiologist will fire up the implant to make sure that it is in working order, if it is in working order then the incision is stitched up and wrap my head in a pressure bandage. Not sure what that is, but it sounds sadistic. Eventually, I will awaken and a nurse will stuff some Jell-O down my throat and then ship me home with a designated driver the same day. Sounds like a walk in the park.

I decided to have my worst ear implanted—the one I haven't heard a thing out of in 15 years. It would be nice if my left ear did more than just hold my glasses up.

August 27, 2007: Hardware Inserted

The good doctor asked me if I was ready to roll. After nodding, I batted my baby blue eyes, and begged him not to shave my hair. He did not fall for it. I pouted the whole way to the operating room.



Here I am at 18 months old. Thank goodness they make hearing aids smaller!

When the anesthesiologist put the mask on my face to put me to sleep that I realized, "Wait, I don't want to do this, stop!" Then that was it. I was officially checked in at the pillow department of the cochlear implant factory and there was nothing I could do about it. Resistance was futile.

I woke up groggy and hungry. No tinnitus, no sore throat, no dizziness, and only a little pain in my left ear. Wow, this is great! My mother complimented my cute little headband. The doctor said that they had a little trouble getting the last electrode in, but finally got it inserted. I got some water, Jell-O and gray chocolate pudding!

Once I was home, I sat my tushy in my recliner and ate little English muffin pizzas, strawberries, and had a sugar-free Popsicle (a girl has to watch her figure, after all). Apparently, there wasn't a darn thing wrong with my appetite!

September 17, 2007: Day One—Munchkin Land

I woke up that morning with Kid Rock's song, *Cowboy*, in my head. The chorus is, "I wanna be a cowboy, baby!" I changed it to "I'm gonna be a cyborg, baby!" Um, yeah, moving right along.

My audiologist, Jennifer, hooked me up to the computer. She had no trouble finding the secret spot where the magnet was. She started the process of activating my brand-spanking-new processor. Jennifer's voice had an echo. I could hear the sounds of her speech, but for the life of me, I couldn't make out what she said. It sounded like all the munchkins from Oz were rounded up and placed in the Tin Man's can with helium. We welcome you to Munchkin Land.

I dropped things and banged on the table to find out what kind of noises I could hear. It sounded like dull thuds. Once she unhooked me and I was officially on my own, I heard the sound of speech. I heard my mom zip and unzip her purse.



At ten years old, it was bad enough I had a hearing problem, but the 80's hairstyle—what was I thinking?

I heard someone talking and it turned out to be my surgeon, standing outside the door. Jennifer showed me how to operate my sexy little processor and all the other gadgets and gizmos that come along with it.

Outside I couldn't hear cars, but a bus sounded semi-normal. A fire truck rushed by, but I couldn't hear it until I actually saw it. Then a helicopter practically landed right on top of my head and I could not hear that! I felt it for sure because this girl got the worst case of wind-blown hair. Once I got into my truck, I nearly jumped out of my stilettos because my blinker was so loud.

Once home, I declared myself officially exhausted for the night. Thank goodness, I did not have to go back to work because I would have been useless. I made myself some soup for dinner and heard the stove dial turn on and off. Figures I would hear that, but not a helicopter about to land on my head.

September 18, 2007: Day 2—I, Cyborg

After work, I was exhausted. I was ready to kick off my shoes and call it a day at 10 a.m. No one told me

how exhausted you get learning how to hear. Let me be the first to tell you that when they turn that implant on, be prepared to take some catnaps. So far, the area where the magnet attaches is a little sore, but not much. I am having a problem with talking above a whisper because I feel like I am talking extremely loud. Sheesh, can't people learn to hear me?

At work, it was business as usual at my sunny little cubicle. Adding machines produced a chime effect like the nickel slot machines at Atlantic City (you can tell I'm a high roller.) When I start typing fast, it sounds like slot machine music.

I could tell when someone was talking but darn if I could make out anything anyone said without lip-reading. Someone blew their nose and it was loud enough to wake a bear out of hibernation!

I had an issue with paper. It did not matter what kind of paper, money, newspaper, magazine, coupons, or toilet paper. It drove me insane and I cringed every time I heard it. It produced a tinny hissy sound that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I don't know if I can work in my office if it continues to sound like this. I work with seven paper flippers. Heaven help me.

Forget music for now. It all sounds like an eight track got chewed up like London broil by some hungry cowboys.

At home, I watched *House* and could follow along with the captions. I felt rather proud of myself. I patted myself on my left ear for a job well done.

September 19, 2007: Day 3—Sound and More Sound

Voices have taken on an obnoxious static tinny sound such as when a radio station is not fully tuned in. I have no speech discrimination. I plugged myself into my laptop and tried listening to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and that did not work out well so it went back on the bookshelf. I opted for some Grimm's

Fairy Tales, one about a donkey that got kicked off a farm to become a singer, steps on a dog, almost gives a cat a heart attack, drops a bunch of mice on their head, befriends a rooster that is in desperate need of Prozac, and they all decided to form a band. I was on pins and needles to find out the ending.

Today the sound of paper was a little less jolting. I still don't think I can continue to work with it much longer. It is driving me insane.

Tonight, I had a revelation. I experienced what CI users say are sounds "going soft." I had the volume turned up all the way. Now I know what everyone means by going soft—it has nothing to do with being a mushy sap.

I can hear my little puppy Bella's weird bark. When she pounces on her toys growling, it has a tinny gargling sound. Normally, the eight-pound furball has a ferocious growl that would embarrass thunder.

Unfortunately, I have not been able to coordinate a helicopter to land on my head again to see if I can hear it this time. Shucks.

September 23, 2007: Culinary Science and Cochlear Implants

I can hear water boiling, pans heating up, and oil popping. I never heard

the little subtleties of onions and garlic being sautéed. Because of that I usually incinerated them by mistake. Now I can hear the olive oil heating up and that keeps me from burning the food.

I just had the most delicious culinary experience with turkey mig-non wrapped in bacon that was ever so moist, partnered with asparagus with a little olive oil and parmesan cheese. It was simply scrumptious. My intention is not to make you salivate and drool over my marriage of flavors, but to tell you that I heard the crunch of the asparagus!

Who knew they were such noisy little vegetables?

September 25, 2007: What is That Whirring?

I can hear so much more since I had my first official mapping yesterday. It was a beautiful Tuesday afternoon at my sunny little cubicle. The sun was shining brightly with a gentle breeze blowing through the windows. All of the sudden, I heard a strange whirring sound. I asked my boss what the sound was. She said it was a helicopter.

I jumped up to my window and if I could I would have turned upside down trying to find the helicopter. Just a week ago, I had a chopper 50

continued on page 14



Left: Aunt Joyce, me (at 24), and my mom, Fran. I'm the only woman in the family with a hearing loss and who is over five foot tall!

Bionic Woman

continued from page 13

feet right on top of me and I could not hear it. I must have been grinning like a mule eating briars the rest of the day.

I'm starting to acclimate to the incoming sounds. Tones are beginning to develop: men sound like men, women sound like women, kids sound like munchkins. There is your proof that my neurons are firing all over the place trying to make sense of this noisy world.

October 15, 2007: A Month's Worth of Reflections

It has been four weeks since I was turned on and I cannot believe the difference. I'm not even talking about what I hear, but how I feel. I feel more secure in my surroundings since I can hear a car approach from behind. I can hear people answer me through a wall. A couple of months ago, I held a fire alarm right against my ear and heard nothing. Today, I can hear it go off when I'm standing outside of my house. This circuit board with a tail has given me back a sense of security and independence.

I love that I can teeter totter between sound and silence. The ultimate power is being able to pull off the magnet from your head. There's something about a dangling cord from your ear that shuts people up!

November 18, 2007: Another CI Moment

I had a CI moment yesterday at Home Depot. I was at the self-checkout. I scanned an item in, and for the first time, I heard it tell me the price. I turned to my friend and asked her if the machine said the price?"

"Yes, Abbie," she replied.

"Really? Has it always said the price or is this something new?"

"Yes, Abbie, it has always said the price."

"Hey, neat," I said, happily scanning another item to hear the computer say \$3.97.

The novelty wore off when I had to pay.



My eight-pound Shih Tzu, Bella, who is my ears when I can't hear.

December 10, 2007: One Happy Bionic Woman

As a teenager full of angst, I took to rock and roll. I spent most of my time banging my head to the astonishing depth of Led Zeppelin, the depressing tranquility of Kurt Cobain, the pure rawness of Guns and Roses, and the culminating riffs of Pink Floyd. I craved the thundering of the drums, percussive tone of the bass guitars, and the thought-provoking lyrics. I would spend countless hours passionately trying to learn the lyrics. Rock and roll was my ultimate solace.

I appreciated what I did hear and felt. I hopelessly wandered from genre to genre and discovered that I prefer to hear bass. When I heard Chris

Daughtry's voice for the first time on *American Idol*, I knew he was going to go places, even after he was voted off the show. His voice had the passionate and soulful resonance of successful rock and rollers. Just hearing that kind of voice stirred up emotions that were dormant for years.

My thoughtful friends surprised me with second row tickets to see Daughtry's concert this past Friday! It was breathtaking to hear him as he serenaded the audience, including this one happy bionic woman. His sultry voice tickled every single electrode of mine that was happily transmitting his every pitch. His dulcet tones were incredibly diverse, ranging from savory sweet with the power to beat your heart to powerfully rockonian with a just a drop of southern comfort. He performed an acoustic rendition of "*All These Lives*." When I closed my eyes, I felt that he was sitting right next to me, soulfully playing the guitar. When it was over, I left knowing that rock and roll was still very much alive in my life.

The cochlear implant has rescued me from a world of silence and reintroduced me to rock and roll. **HTM**

Abbie Cranmer is an HLAA member and bookkeeper from Barnegat, New Jersey. She found Hearing Loss Association of America on the Internet last year and notes that many of her online friends are members as well. You can read more about Abbie on her blog at <http://contradica.blogspot.com/>



Meet Abbie in Reno at the HLAA Annual Conference, June 12-15!

Abbie's top three reasons for going to Reno...

1. I have never been there and I have never flown, so this will be a new experience all the way around!
2. I want to be able to put a face with the people I have met online that have been so helpful during my cochlear implant journey and connect with new people that live with a hearing loss.
3. I want to broaden my horizons about emerging technology for hard of hearing people and gain a better understanding of the issues that HLAA is involved in.