Hearing Loss and Cochlear Implants: A Family's Perspective

When someone is losing their hearing, it affects more than their ability to register sounds. They can often feel a strain on their social life, struggle in day-to-day family routines and develop a sense of being cut off from the world. For Adele Millwood, who suffered with progressive hearing loss for 16 years and now has two cochlear implants, her journey majorly affected the lives of her two teenage sons and husband. "Our sons were moving into adolescence with a mother who couldn't hear them," Adele says. "They were scared and frustrated. Often, Josh and Caleb forgot to get my attention before they started speaking and got flustered with me for not understanding the first time."

Though younger son Caleb, who is now an adult, calls his behavior as a 12-year-old "selfish and bratty," he remembers his mom’s hearing loss as a relationship barrier. "I didn't go out of my way to try to talk to her about things because it was just too much effort with the hearing aids," he says. "I was young, irritated and every attempt to communicate exasperated me."

Older son Josh suffered second-hand embarrassment for his mom and worried that wearing hearing aids would cause her social anxiety. "I just really didn't want her to feel self-conscious," he says. "I remember seeing her fumbling with the batteries and feeling awful." Little did Josh and Caleb know, their mom’s hearing aids were not doing much to help her at all. Even with front row seats, she missed out on hearing them sing lyrics in band concerts, speak their wedding vows and even deliver a valedictorian speech. "Years later, she told us the heartbreaking truth," Josh says. "She didn't want others to feel uncomfortable with her disability, so she didn’t let us know how much she was missing out on."

Adele's husband Randy had a better grasp on the severity of her hearing loss and found himself stepping into the role of extrovert at church functions and social gatherings, which he wasn't comfortable with. "Personally, I'm an introvert. I had become so used to my partner, my high school sweetheart, gracefully handling conversations. I depended on her in that way," he says. "At parties, between the talking, music, ringing in her ears and loss of hearing, she was totally lost. I'd have to jump in and try to figure out a way to make conversation flow. We were in a rhythm and that all changed."

When Adele was approved as a cochlear implant candidate, the family was worried and had questions, but they were mostly hopeful and excited. "No one likes to think of a loved one having surgery, but the more we learned about cochlear implants, the more it seemed like an opportunity we could not pass up," Josh says.

After the first implant, life improved drastically for the Millwood family. Holidays got bigger, louder and more joyful. Adele was able to go to the movies, chat and play with her grandchildren and most importantly, found a sense of inclusion.

Her second cochlear implant surgery, which took place at GBMC, had the whole family overjoyed that Adele could hear out of two ears again. "The Cochlear Implant Center at GBMC is just an absolute miracle," Randy says. "Their competency and care is outstanding. Doctor Regina Presley and Doctor Scott London are top notch."

Randy feels that he has his high school sweetheart back. "She has returned to being the bubbly person that she is, carrying conversations, asking questions, being engaged," he says. "When I see her in the pool, laughing and playing with our grandkids, not missing anything, I feel so blessed that we did this."