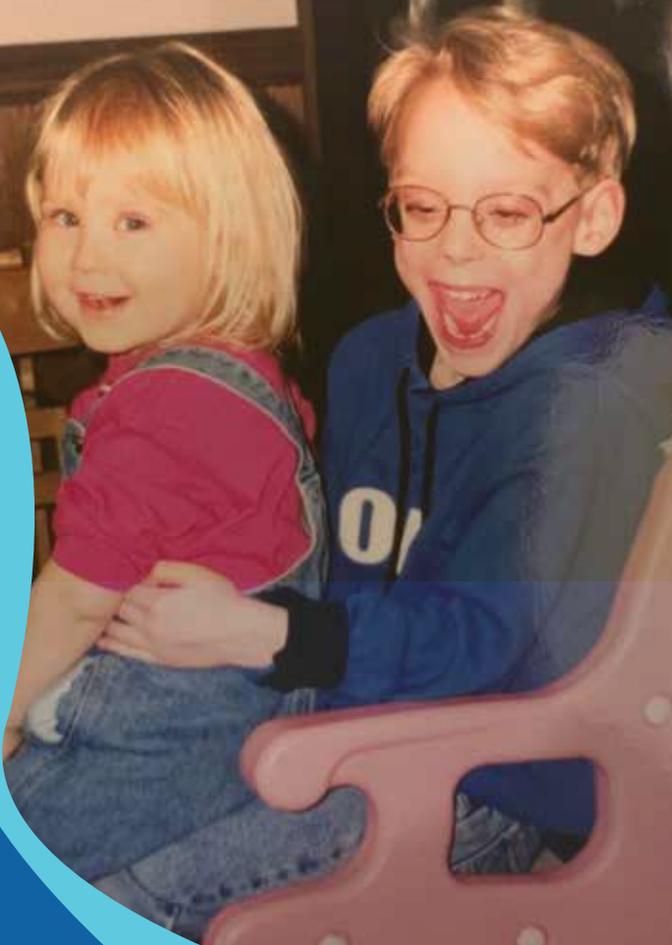


My Hearing Journey



Hear Entendre
Québec

By: Annalise Kluender



I was fortunate to grow up surrounded by a community of diverse abilities. My older brother, Kyle, was born with cerebral palsy. My neighbourhood best friend, Ryan, has a developmental disability. My aunt is a physical therapist and has a daughter not much older than me; she has a cochlear implant and uses American Sign Language (ASL).

Throughout my childhood, my brother and I participated in Wisconsin TOPSoccer (The Outreach Program for Soccer). TOPSoccer's goal is to enable the thousands of young athletes with disabilities to become valued and successful members of the US Youth Soccer family. My brother was a participant and I was a buddy. As a buddy, I assisted in weekly community-based soccer training partnering with athletes aged 8-19 who have mental or physical disabilities.

Kyle has been my best friend my entire life. Growing up, we did almost everything together. We played together and swam together. I stuck around during his weekly physical therapy sessions after his countless surgeries and every Sunday morning we would both partake in a therapeutic horseback riding session donning our Tweety Bird and Tasmanian Devil helmets.

Having close relationships with people who have disabilities helped me accept my hearing loss with ease. The biggest struggle was the period prior to the hearing loss. When I was about 13, I came down with Influenza B. Shortly after that, I began having random "attacks" of intense vertigo, followed by hours of nausea and vomiting until my body could bear no more. These attacks would strike any time, anywhere and the frequency of vertigo attacks also seemed random. Sometimes I would have a few a month, while at other times, they'd be months apart. My family struggled to find adequate help, taking me to specialist after specialist. I had acquired tinnitus in my right ear and it was determined that an inner ear issue must be at the root of the problem. I remember being prescribed diuretics, and even steroids, to try and ameliorate my inner ear issues. I had the option of having surgery to put steroids in my inner ear, but we decided it wasn't worth the risk.

Not knowing when the vertigo would strike caused me some anxiety. In a matter of seconds, I would go from completely fine to violently dizzy or ill, almost unable to move. My parents were very supportive and I was lucky to have them ready to quickly pick me up whenever and wherever I became sick.

Eventually doctors deduced that I had Ménière's disease. I presented the classic requirements for the disease: vertigo lasting more than 20 minutes, hearing loss on at least one occasion, and tinnitus. I don't remember when my hearing loss began, but I do remember the frustration of not knowing what was happening or how to proceed. Getting fitted for my first set of hearing aids was an exciting opportunity. There wasn't much I could do myself to improve my condition, but having a tangible solution for one of my Ménière's complications was monumental for me. At the time, I was told my type of hearing loss would be best aided by CROS hearing aids. I was maybe 15 at the time, and while I loved them at first, I wore them intermittently throughout high school before deciding that they weren't as helpful anymore.

I made it two years into university before attributing any of my academic struggles to my hearing loss. I hadn't been wearing my hearing aids but still made sure to sit in the very front. Despite this, there were a handful of professors that I simply could not understand. I would miss every third word of what they were saying and could in no way take proper notes. The moment of realization for me that I needed additional help was when I had to drop a class because I missed too much of what the professor said, and had no friends in the class to help me with notes.



I sought out support from the university's Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and eventually managed to navigate the Canadian healthcare system and obtain a new hearing aid. The rest of my university time went well, hearing-wise, and I even became a note taker for the OSD. Socially, I've managed to adapt. My friends make sure they're not on my left side (bad side) when we're walking together and, when possible, to look at me when we're talking.

After university my biggest challenge became finding a job. I tried working as a server and hostess in a restaurant, but even on their quietest days, it was a struggle. I got a job at a depanneur, and while it was better than the restaurant, the background music and the continual loud chime of the door sometimes made hearing customers nearly impossible.

Navigating my Ménière's and hearing loss is a process that will continue to evolve for the rest of my life. Being diagnosed with Ménière's was a bit of a bumpy ride, but because of the diverse abilities within my close community, I was able to easily accept my hearing loss. There is always the possibility I could lose more hearing, but right now, I simply appreciate the hearing I have.

I recently celebrated my 24th birthday. My family lives back in the U.S., and for my birthday, I was surprised with a package in the mail. My father had sent me an American Girl doll, something I loved when I was a kid. They had historical dolls and "Truly Me" dolls, which are designed to have features matching the child that owns them. This doll was their special 2020 Girl of the Year, Joss Kendrick. Usually, as a 24-year-old, I wouldn't get excited about a doll – especially a doll that doesn't look like me at all. But this was different. This year, the Hearing Loss



A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is shown in profile, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark blue top and a necklace with a square pendant. She is holding a doll with long brown hair and a hearing aid in its ear. The background is a wood-paneled wall. A blue decorative shape is in the top right corner.

Association of America and American Girl partnered together to increase education and awareness of hearing loss by making their 2020 Girl of the Year born with hearing loss and wearing a hearing aid in her right ear. I have hearing loss and I wear a hearing aid in my right ear! Our hearing aids match, our cases match, and our cleaning supplies match! When I was a child I could easily find a doll that had blonde hair and blue eyes like myself, and yet as an adult, somehow I became emotional over a doll that, at first glance, looked nothing like me.

I was extremely lucky as a kid to grow up in a community with all kinds of representations of lifestyles and abilities. I had other girls with hearing loss to look up to, and yet over a decade since my hearing loss was diagnosed (a hearing loss I didn't even have as a child), seeing a doll with a hearing aid was moving. Not everyone is able to have such a diverse representation of abilities in their life. Not every little child with hearing loss knows someone else in real life with hearing loss, or knows of a celebrity or TV character with hearing loss. Having a multinational company adding a small (literally, physically small) hearing aid to a doll is a huge gesture for a child with hearing loss – and, as it turns out, for a 24-year-old too!

Annalise Kluender is Hear Québec's newest employee and a recent graduate of McGill University with a degree in History and Political Science. Always on a quest to learn, Annalise is an avid reader and a true crime, political, and epidemiology podcast junkie.