

My Hearing Journey

By Annette Perry

I was born deaf due to rubella (German measles), but I was not diagnosed until I was 5 and a half years old. I have a severe-to-profound sensorineural hearing loss in both ears. The left ear has some residual hearing and fairly good discrimination, whereas the right ear has very poor discrimination and only minimal awareness of sound.

At the time of my diagnosis, I was fitted with hearing aids and I remember being in awe of the sounds I heard. I never minded wearing them. In fact, I was happy to have them, as they allowed me to hear and learn how to speak – and to understand so much of what was going on in the world. Despite all my mother's hard work, I started school quite ill prepared. But as the years went by, I learned to listen, speak and function as independently as possible.

I graduated from university with a Master's in Social Work and hoped to have a career that would allow me to spend time listening to, talking with and helping people. I have always enjoyed working, learning from others and being stimulated. My ability to use the phone – and not to always rely on my lipreading skills – helped me a lot in my work.

I had always felt that I functioned well with my hearing aids and coped well with my hearing loss, but over

time, my life evolved and I had a family. As my daughter got older, it became obvious that I was missing more than I realized, as she would report to me that “the lady in the store was talking to you” and other similar observations. My deafness was invisible to many, because I wear behind-the-ear hearing aids.



Over the years, friends and professionals at Mackay Centre (now known as Lethbridge-Layton-Mackay Rehabilitation Center) suggested that I consider a cochlear implant. The idea of someone “fiddling” with my hearing seemed scary, especially since I was always comfortable with how I functioned. But as I got older, it became more apparent that the hearing I considered adequate might not remain as it was. I decided to explore the option of having an implant.

After some initial testing at the Lethbridge-Layton-Mackay Audiology department, an application was made. In Quebec City, I underwent more intensive hearing tests and interviews. They wanted to better understand my rationale for considering the implant. For me, it was simple: I would only consider an implant on the right side, as any hearing from this ear might improve my quality of life and enable me to hear more. Two years later, the team accepted my application. Finally, the surgery was set for June 27, 2019. I prepared to leave work for a time and uproot myself to Quebec City in order to undergo surgery and have the activation done.



On the first day, the audiologist showed me two implants, one called a Naida from Advanced Bionics, which was MRI compatible, and another system, which was slimmer in appearance, but not MRI compatible. After some consideration, I chose the Naida system since it fit my ear better and I liked the idea that I could have an MRI if I ever needed one in the future, especially considering my age (62). The following day was the surgery. Amazingly, though still very nervous, I wanted to go ahead. I was happy that the operating room staff did not wear masks (at least not while I was awake!), and they had me wear my aids in the operating room, promising someone would take them off and keep them safe for me.

After the surgery, I felt well enough to go to my hotel room by taxi, and had a meal - though I experienced some lightheadedness, a metallic taste in my mouth, and noticed my jaw did not open as wide as usual. The ear had some pain but it did not bother me too much, as I had been advised I might experience these sensations. However later in the day and the following day, I began to experience some severe symptoms as the anesthetic wore off (nausea & vomiting) – a condition that had happened to me once before. This rare occurrence affects only 3% of the population. After a brief stay in the ER, I returned home.

The following week, I returned to Quebec City for the activation. They turned on the 16 electrodes very slowly and at a very soft level in order to allow my brain some time to adjust to hearing. The following day, I saw the rehabilitation audiologist, who had me listen to words and short sentences. I could hear the days of the week quite clearly and even some short sentences, like “get out” and “the dog is barking.” I was surprised at how I could make out words! How quickly my brain was absorbing new sounds!

With my rehabilitation continuing in Montreal, I am just beginning this journey and I have no idea how it will unfold – but I am excited to see what the effect will be on my life, my work and my family.

Annette Perry is a social worker at Summit School, which has been educating individuals with developmental disabilities for over 50 years. Annette works with both students and their families. In her free time, she enjoys skiing, swimming, hiking and being with family and friends.