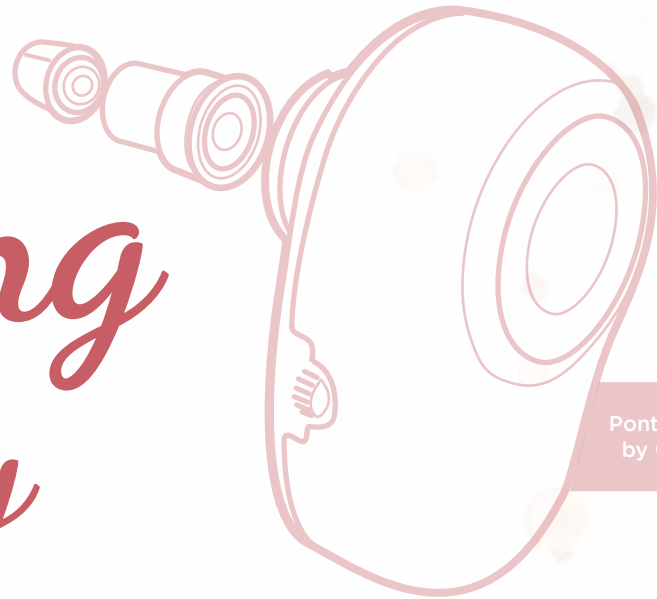


# My Hearing Journey

By Virginia Walsh



Ponto 3 Superpower  
by Oticon Medical

My story starts when I was just little. My parents say that for the first four years of my life, all I ever said was “key, car!” Growing up was quite a challenge, especially when I was placed in a special school for students with intellectual disabilities, which I would attend for eighteen years. I now understand that I was actually born with a hearing loss, which in those days could be quite a rough adventure, especially when not everybody sees you for you.

In the '80s and '90s, we did not quite have the technology that we have today. What happened to me, it seems, was that my hearing loss was misdiagnosed as an intellectual disability. I spent my elementary years not knowing what was going on. I was often put in the corner or in the hallway. I was told I had won a trip to Disneyland, but never got to go. I was often bullied by my own classmates, and also the students of whatever school our satellite class was in. It felt like both the education system and the health care system had failed me – like I had fallen through the cracks. But I learned to keep on going.

When I was thirteen, I got my first hearing aids. My parents didn't know that the government was supposed to cover the cost, and the staff at the audioprosthodontist's office didn't mention it. Whoops again, right? As a student, I was actually supposed to be covered for both ears. Growing up, there were many things that I could not have, simply because we did not have the money. My family didn't realize that they did not have to pay for this expense.

The hearing aids were very painful and gave me infections all the time. I had started seeing an ENT specialist who checked my ears and had me go for a CT scan. That was when he told me that I basically had no ear canals to begin with! Go figure! It was as if my ears had their own earplugs! I also had underdeveloped eardrums. No wonder I couldn't hear!

The specialist tried opening my right ear canal twice, and the second time he also tried to open the left one. Boy, they hurt! Both times the surgeries failed. That was when he suggested I get a BAHA (bone-anchored hearing aid). He told me that I would need more surgeries, which I also understood would be expensive, but I was sick and tired of surgeries and strongly believed that they would not help. I was only fifteen or sixteen years old, and when you're that young, you can do very foolish things! So the ENT specialist instead prescribed the usual hearing aids for both ears – but I ended up getting just one hearing aid (I have no clue why) even though I was still a full-time student.

I was still struggling, especially as these were supposed to be my high school years. I was getting into trouble quite a bit, a good part of it because I couldn't hear instructions. I would finish with my school at the age of 21, after three years in their adult special-ed program. It was not only monotonous, it was not all that interesting. Despite the eighteen years I spent with them, I still came out knowing very little. I had a part-time job



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that paid \$7.75/hour, but for the long travel distance, high output expectations and slow, inefficient system, I decided they could eat my \$7.75/hour. I was moving on!

I started regular adult education as a full-time student in September of 2011 and got a new left-side hearing aid that November. This story sure is sounding very one sided, isn't it?! I would graduate two years later. With my academic advisor, I had originally agreed to do vocational training in PC Technical Support, but my welfare agent noted that it would be bad with my hearing loss because it required using the telephone. She passed me over to a job search agency where I underwent more IQ and personality testing (even though I had just graduated from a regular school with honours.) After looking over the results and my options, we decided that I should pursue Graphic Design, which could supplement the filmmaking skills I had developed in school. But when I went back to the welfare agent with this decision, to my dismay, she said no.

I would see another welfare agent after that, who suggested MAB/Mackay. The staff there asked me if speechreading was something that I wanted to do, and I said yes. After a session of classes with MAB/Mackay, I still wanted to learn more. This is how I started speechreading with Hear Quebec. At MAB/Mackay, I had access to a trial BAHA, which worked so well that they started the process of getting me my own BAHA for my right ear. It took about two years to get from referral to an implanted BAHA.

The model that I got is called the Ponto 3 Superpower by Oticon Medical, and it greatly improved my hearing. I went on the year-long waiting list for surgery for my other ear and when June of 2018 came around, I was so happy to hear I would get the surgery done at the end of the month. Unfortunately, they called me back a couple days later to say that it had been cancelled because a more urgent case had come up. When I will ever get that surgery, or the left side Ponto, I don't know.

On a happy note, I have continued my speechreading classes with Hear Quebec, started volunteering there, and have also taken some art classes there. I have started going back to the Youth Employment Centre, to get that ball rolling again. I want to start college again, knowing that the surgery may still happen, although when, nobody knows. I hope it will be soon! I am going to keep trying my best, and hopefully still volunteer at Hear Quebec for years to come. I plan on becoming a teacher, but my passion is in filmmaking, so we'll see where that goes! This is my story – just one of many stories.

My hope is that this is a problem that gets recognized and eventually fixed. I have survived, and I am not alone. My hope is that maybe my story can make a difference.

*My Hearing Journey is a regular feature of HEARHEAR Magazine. In this column, members tell their stories – including frustrations, hopes, challenges and triumphs. To submit your own hearing journey, please contact the Hear Quebec office.*