

# Hearing Journey

## Waves of Sounds: From Hearing Aids to Cochlear Implants

by Salvatore Castellano

When I was two years old, my doctor made the shocking discovery that I had bilateral severe hearing loss, and it had been so since birth. Instantly, my parents made the decision that they would do everything in their power to help me learn how to hear and talk. Although it was difficult, I didn't let anything hold me back. I traveled the world, engaged in competitive inner-city soccer, represented Québec as a member of the Deaf Olympics Ice Hockey team, and began my Aerospace career as a Design Engineer, eventually advancing to the position of Program Engineering Manager.

Then one night, in March 2020, I unexpectedly lost all of the residual hearing in my right ear. At the time, I thought it was exhaustion, but the following morning, my hearing had not improved. Suddenly, I found myself having to leave meetings at work due to excruciating migraines. I couldn't concentrate because even though my left ear was working as it had, my right ear felt like it was submerged under water, and the sound distortion made lip reading difficult.

As COVID-19 was rapidly increasing, I wasn't sure how long it would take to be seen by a doctor, so I left work immediately to get my hearing checked. The ENT finally informed me that the hearing in my right ear had declined severely, and he didn't know if it would improve. Hearing this, I lost focus. Would I cease to hear? Was I going to hear my family's voice again? Would this affect my left ear too? Would the migraines that were now plaguing

me going to last forever? I quickly became so vulnerable, since I had so many different emotions: sadness, bewilderment, anger, and frustration.

My doctors believed the best course of action to help me regain my lost hearing would be to inject three cortisone shots with a four-inch flexible needle directly into my right cochlea. The easiest way to describe this incredibly painful sensation would be to compare it to the kind of brain freeze you might get after drinking a slushie too quickly. Instantly, and then for an hour afterwards, my body's temperature fluctuated with constant headaches.



While my hearing gradually improved, and I was able to understand conversations again, I had unfortunately developed tinnitus in my right ear that sounded like a persistent hissing of steam.

I had another sudden hearing drop in April 2021. Suddenly, all of my previous anxieties returned. I saw my ENT specialist immediately and received steroid pills in hopes to regain my hearing.

Unfortunately, a month later, I experienced more hearing loss—this time in my left ear. At this point, the nightmare began.

My hearing aids served no purpose any more. My inner ear was so off balance, I couldn't walk. The tinnitus drowned out all sounds around me, I suffered from frequent headaches and migraines. I was unable to function.

I visited another ENT specialist and gave her my peculiar medical history from the previous year. She immediately proposed administering three more cortisone injections, but this time, over the course of a week. I agreed right away because I knew I couldn't continue to live in this condition. Another painful procedure.

After a month passed with no progress, the only option was for me to get bilateral cochlear

implants. I had a consultation with the cochlear implant surgeon in Québec City following an emergency application through my ENT specialist.

In August of 2021, I underwent the four-hour bilateral cochlear implant surgery. It was successful, but the path to recovery was difficult, especially at first. Fortunately, when the bandages were taken off and I was implanted with two temporary cochlear implants, I felt an immediate release of pressure.

Pitch and tone were the first sounds I heard. Finding out how loud these pitches were was the objective. I was given the opportunity to try four different programs, but they all sounded the same to me. Strange sounds were all I heard for the following two weeks. Since I didn't recognize voices, it was frightening for me that everyone's voice had the same tone and pitch.

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Physically, I felt like I'd been put through the ringer. My jaw hurt and everything I ate tasted metallic. Because of all the unfamiliar sounds, I was mentally exhausted, and taking naps had become customary. There were times I was so queasy and lightheaded that I had to sit still. It was annoying. But I had to keep telling myself that this was all a part of the healing process.

## ***"A new hope was kindled."***

Two weeks following my operation, I traveled back to Québec City, so my cochlear implants could be officially activated. When I finally heard my parents' voices, it was an extremely emotional moment. When I returned to the hotel to unwind, I began to hear sounds that I had never heard before: running water, air conditioning, and doors closing. A new hope was kindled.

I started my eight-week treatment program at the LLM Rehabilitation Centre as soon as I got home. I received an intensive calendar of appointments with the speech-language pathologist, case worker, and audiologist. I realized I had a difficult and protracted path ahead of me. Thanks to modern technology, I can connect my implants via Bluetooth to my phone, TV, and computer. Even though I still have constant tinnitus, with time it will be drowned out with the humming of the refrigerator, boiling water, chirping of birds, crickets and most of all, the soothing sound of the ocean. As I move ahead in my listening environment, I look forward to the new sounds the future holds for me.



**Salvatore Castellano** is one of Hear Quebec's newest Board Members. Since a very young age, he has experienced and dealt with hearing loss. He is also a new cochlear implant user.

***"Hearing well changes everything!"***



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