

# A Young Deaf-Blind Woman Experiences Independence with Cochlear Implants

**Ashley Jackson is a college student drawing on her own experience of being deaf and blind to pursue a degree in Family and Consumer Science. She spoke with ACI Alliance about her decision to pursue cochlear implants as a young adult and how this technology has changed her life.**

**ACIA: Ashley, were you born with vision loss?**

**AJ:** When I was three months old, doctors discovered that I had tumors in both my retinas. These tumors were treated very aggressively to keep them from spreading to my brain. Both of my eyes were removed when I was a year old.

**ACIA: How old were you at the onset of your hearing loss?**

**AJ:** My hearing loss started at about one year old. It became progressively worse over time. I was fit with hearing aids at five years of age, right around the time I started kindergarten. As I got older, my hearing continued to decline. I received my cochlear implants at the age of 20. The procedure and devices were covered by TennCare, the state's Medicaid program.

**ACIA: Tell us about your life with cochlear implants.**

**AJ:** At first, I didn't like the cochlear implants. I felt like there was too much stimulation for my brain. It was exhausting and I was tired all the time. After a bit I realized that I was listening to a whole different world. I didn't realize how bad my hearing had become and how little my hearing aids were doing to help me. I hear most conversations now and I can hear birds sing!

*continued*



## **ACIA: Have cochlear implants advanced your independence?**

**AJ:** Yes, It is now possible for me to have conversations with people. Before I felt left out. It was hard for me follow a conversation and keep up with the different speakers.

## **ACIA: Have your cochlear implants helped with your academic work?**

**AJ:** I feel like they are a huge benefit. I'm a junior at the University of Tennessee at Martin majoring in Family and Consumer Science with a concentration in Child and Family. I use an FM System or other wireless microphone system in the classrooms and I also have an interpreter in my classes. My primary mode of communication has always been listening and talking, but I want to make sure I receive as much information as I can. I would not be doing as well as I am in my classes if I were still using hearing aids.

## **ACIA: Did your visual impairment contribute to your decision to pursue cochlear implants?**

**AJ:** I never thought of it that way. I remember being nervous about what would happen if the cochlear implants didn't work as I would have been totally lost. But it has made such a difference in my ability to interact with others.

## **ACIA: What are your goals for the future?**

**AJ:** I will graduate in the fall of 2018. I would like to live more independently after graduation and on working on finding my own apartment.

I'd like to get a job working with parents of children with special needs. I'd like to help guide them in communication with their children and advise them on opportunities available to them. I know that families want the most for their children. That would be the dream job for me.

## **ACIA: Do you have any thoughts you would like to share with others who might be considering cochlear implantation?**

**AJ:** It's important to understand that for someone who has been deaf their whole life, or almost their whole life, that it will be more difficult to understand speech and sounds initially. They have never experienced sound like this before. It takes a lot of effort. I worked with a speech therapist as a child and again after I was implanted. I think that made a difference for me. Cochlear implants opened up the world for me and I'm happy I made the choice to get them.



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