Personal Purpose, Professional Passion

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Carrie Spangler is the lead educational audiologist at the Summit Educational Service Center in Cuyahoga Falls Ohio. She has over 20 years of professional experience and a lifelong experience of living with hearing loss. She is a wife, mom of two teenagers, blogger, and host of the empowEAR Audiology podcast.

“One day you will tell your story of how you overcame what you went through and it will be someone else’s survival guide.”
—Brene Brown

Let’s take a short step back in my story. I was born with a mild sloping to severe to profound bilateral hearing loss, late identified at the age of 4 years (before Universal Newborn Hearing Screening), and then fitted with my first set of hearing aids shortly thereafter. Going to my neighborhood school and being the “one and only” was not always easy. I was presented with a roller coaster of challenges navigating the hearing world. In hindsight, these formative, developmental years of challenges set the stage for my personal purpose and professional passion; becoming an educational audiologist who is passionate about advocacy and purposeful in sharing my hearing journey story.

Early in my career, I learned the power of being courageous to tell your story. We all have a story to tell, and it can be one of the strongest ways to bond with others on a personal level as well as advocate for the needs of others. I was given this opportunity back in 1999 when I was asked to testify in front of Ohio’s state legislators advocating for the need for universal newborn hearing screening. I was able to infuse my professional knowledge of benefit of early intervention with my personal experiences of being late identified and needing years of intervention and special education support. This personal (and professional) story grabbed the attention of the legislators, and I was thankful for the courage to stand up on behalf of children in the State of Ohio.

I share this because these experiences gave me the foresight to journal my thoughts, feelings, and emotions early on when I first started thinking about the cochlear implant journey. Through my multiple journal entries, the idea of sharing my story came to fruition with a blog, hearingspanglish.blog (check it out!). In one of the first blog posts, I talk about “unfocused” hearing and how over a few years, I felt my hearing was becoming like a camera lens that is out of focus. Hearing through my hearing aids became more and more of a struggle that I could not ignore. I was putting so much effort into trying to hear and understand that I found myself retreating to solitude more and more and that was not who I was.

Putting on my professional hat, I knew deep inside what my next step needed to be. I began reaching out to my professional connections in the cochlear implant world to ask questions. I took advantage of every opportunity that I had to attend a continuing education event about cochlear implants. I talked to cochlear implant surgeons that I knew, mapping audiologists and my audiology friends who have cochlear implants. These personal and professional connections drove me to schedule an appointment for a cochlear implant consultation.

In July 2019, I had my CI consultation at the Ohio State University Medical Center. After an exhausting several hours of audiology testing, my “unfocused” hearing was confirmed. Audiologically, I was a candidate for a cochlear implant. I also had an appointment on the same day with Dr. Oliver Adunka. He further confirmed that I was a candidate and explained the next steps if this was the path that I wanted to take. I went into this consultation day thinking that I was just there to gather more information. By the end of the appointment, I knew that the cochlear implant decision was the next step in my hearing journey.

The months between July and November was filled with a roller coaster of emotions. I felt excited, scared, nervous, and thrilled to be starting this next step in my hearing journey. Sharing my story allowed me to surround myself with family and friends who were willing to jump onto this roller coaster ride with me and be my greatest supporters.

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I knew I needed to trust and have faith in the process. This was a true test of my patience, perseverance, and positivity.

November 15, 2019 was my surgery day and I was blessed with an incredible medical team, CI surgeon, audiologist, and supportive family and friends. I left the hospital the same day to recover at home. December 4 was activation day. I felt like a little kid waiting for Christmas morning! I was fully prepared mentally for the unnatural sounds that I was going to initially hear. My mindset moving forward was that I am running a marathon, not a sprint. Learning to listen was going to take much patience, perseverance, and positivity.

Today, I continue to run in the cochlear implant marathon. Just as running a marathon presents with training, focused mindset, injuries, setbacks, challenges, pacing, and keeping up with your PR (personal record), so does the cochlear implant marathon. I am committed to dedicated time to practice listening, keeping a positive mindset, attending scheduled mappings, and keeping my own PR. When I have a setback in my PR (or hearing journey), I have learned to ask questions of my cochlear implant team so that we can have a better training program for my cochlear implant marathon.

Circling back to the courage to share your story; after receiving my cochlear implant, I decided to join the American Cochlear Implant Alliance as a consumer member and become involved. I was drawn to the mission of the organization to advance access to the gift of hearing provided by cochlear implantation through research, advocacy, and awareness. I know my own cochlear implant marathon has changed my life. I joined the CI CAN (Cochlear Implant Consumer Advocacy Network) and also became an ACI Alliance State Champion for Ohio to share my own personal and professional expertise to positively influence change at the individual, state, and national level. I remembered the impact of being courageous to share my story with Ohio legislators to advocate for support of universal newborn hearing screening; in this next hearing journey chapter I am driven to share my cochlear implant journey story in hopes that someone else will positively benefit.

What will you do with your own personal or professional story to be a survival guide for someone else? ACI Alliance is an organization that provides the toolbox for your story to come alive and play a critical role in shaping the future of children and adults living with significant hearing loss. It is my hope that you find the courage to get involved. Sharing your story and advocacy works!