

Participation in the ACI Alliance Medicare Expansion Study Changed My Life!

Ann Liming



Ann (right) talks with her niece

I first learned about cochlear implants (CIs) from my older sister, who was diagnosed with hearing loss when we were in high school. After high school, my sister was fit with a hearing aid but she continued to lose her hearing after she had a child. She eventually received a cochlear implant and told me that it changed her life.

I got involved in the Hearing Loss Association of America chapter in Grand Rapids (MI) and learned more about CIs through that group including learning directly from several people about the life-changing benefits of a cochlear implant. When I was evaluated for a cochlear implant, I did not qualify (for having too much hearing), and it was frustrating to have conversations with others who would urge me to consider a cochlear implant when I knew I didn't qualify for the device under existing Medicare criteria.

During this time, I visited an out-of-state friend who also had hearing

loss and realized just how hard it was for her to communicate. If she were doing dishes, cooking, or any activity with noise we couldn't speak with each other at all. I would occasionally forget this and initiate a conversation with her, but quickly realized she wasn't able to hear me. This made me realize the frustration my own friends must feel trying to have conversations with me, so after my trip I went home and asked my friends what it was like to communicate with me. I was met with dead silence from my friends and realized I needed to get another evaluation for a cochlear implant.

While I still did not qualify at that time, I learned about the Medicare coverage expansion study during my evaluation and was able to join the study.

As I prepared for my activation, I thought about conversations I'd had with my sister about what voices sounded like with a cochlear implant. She said that it "sounds like everybody else" but when my audiologist (Terry Zwolan PhD) activated my cochlear implant my first thought was this is awful. I quickly realized there was a learning curve and an adjustment period to get to my new normal. At Dr. Zwolan's recommendation, I listened to audiobooks and remember looking through the rehab programs and apps that were recommended before my mapping appointments to make sure I was aware of all of her recommended options. Gradually my cochlear implant became my new normal through this process.

I currently have one cochlear implant and use a hearing aid in my other

ear and am currently considering a second cochlear implant. I am astonished that I can't hear well at all with my hearing aid alone, but when I use it with my implant everything is better. A second cochlear implant has been suggested for me and I am currently weighing my options since my cochlear implant has allowed me to start playing the piano again and I am not sure I want to change my current situation.

One of my long-term frustrations had been hearing from other people how wonderful their experience had been with a CI, but not qualifying for one myself for so long. My CI is very visible since she I wear my hair short. Hence, I find myself regularly talking about my hearing loss and my cochlear implant with people I see in stores and around town. I always tell people if they need a CI and qualify for it, not to put it off.

I still have some issues with hearing on the phone with some voices and accents, but I love that I have the confidence in most situations to make and receive phone calls. That, for me, it is a miracle. I also love the new features of my cochlear implant including the linkage to Bluetooth. I love to help others learn to utilize all the features and accessories of their hearing technology.

I was a nurse and feel disappointed when some people won't even think about a CI for various reasons. I want to share my story because my CI is a gift to me. I was thrilled to be a part of the Medicare expansion study and help others have access to this extraordinary technology. ■