

“MY DAUGHTER’S LAUGH WAS THE FIRST SOUND I HEARD IN 30 YEARS”

For Olivia Andersen, being deaf was just a part of who she was – and even when science offered her a chance to change that, she saw no reason to do so. Then her baby girl entered the world ...

When I was little, I sat down, tears streaming down my face, and wrote a letter to God. “Dear Goddy,” I wrote. “Please let me hear with no hearing aid before I die. Please, give me a go.”

I was 11. We’d been sitting down for dinner as a family, laughing and joking around as we always did. I was exhausted from a day of lip-reading at school, and emotionally raw from being teased. I sat

at the table silently, while around me my brothers and sister joked and chided one another, smiles painted across their faces. It was too much. I pushed away from the table and raced upstairs to my bedroom, collapsing on my bed in tears. My heart was screaming with the injustice of it all: Why me? Why did I have to be the one without hearing? That’s when I picked up the pen and made my plea to God.

A few days later, a teacher had the letter published in *The Sydney Morning*

Herald. A reply came back from “Goddy” telling me about an angel he knew in heaven named Acoustica who had a wonderful, happy life, even though she couldn’t hear very well either.

In all my years of deafness, it was the one and only time I had asked for hearing. When “Goddy” (who turned out to be a kind and sympathetic neighbour) told me to embrace my silent life, I did. Hearing was never something I wanted for again. At least, not then. ▶

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JULIE ADAMS. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY RACHEL MONTGOMERY/RELOAD AGENCY



COLUMN 8

THIS has been Deafness Awareness Week, which is a good reason for bringing this prayer to you. It was written by Olivia, an 11-year-old profoundly deaf girl, from Killara. Olivia's mother found it under Olivia's bed, and gave it to Sister Caterina, who has worked for decades with deaf children. ...

Dear Goddy,
I don't want to hurt my feelings. I don't want to be deaf. It's too hard for me.
Goddy, please let me hear with no hearing aid before I die because I want to have a try. Could you do that? Hope you could.
I feel so tired. How's life there? Hope it's OK? How's the angels?



Clockwise from left: Olivia's plea to "Goddy", which was published in a Sydney newspaper when she was 11; Olivia's Year 2 photo, taken at the mainstream school her parents were told she would never be able to attend; a 1980 photo with (clockwise from bottom left) baby Olivia, mum Belinda, sister Sophie, brother Angus, dad Malcolm and brother Forbes (front); Olivia, 3, with her mum; with her family in the early '90s.

I was diagnosed profoundly deaf at eight months old. I'd been at the hospital for a check-up when a mothercraft nurse had rung a bell behind my head and received no response. My parents were devastated. The normal, happy childhood they had envisioned for me vanished, and was replaced with one full of doctors' appointments and hearing aids – things no parent wants for their child. On the drive home from the hospital, my mother wept while I slept in the back of the car, blissfully unaware of the road that lay ahead of me. At home, she held my father's hand as they broke the news to the rest of the family. Little Liv was deaf. They would need to speak clearly and slowly to me, but otherwise I was to be treated no differently.

That conversation set the tone for my family's attitude about my deafness. Sure, I couldn't hear. But they weren't about to let that stop me from having a normal childhood. When doctors told my parents I would never be able to speak or go to a mainstream school, they put me in an early-intervention program where I underwent speech and language development, and acquired lip-reading

skills. By age six, I was at a primary school full of boisterous children. Being the only hearing-impaired kid there made me the subject of some ridicule, but every time an insensitive classmate knocked me down, it seemed my sister was there to pick me back up. My siblings were, and remain, my fiercest, most loving protectors. I became so adept at lip-reading that I could tell what someone was going to say just by watching the movements of their jaw muscles. I could speak quite clearly, though some people said it sounded like I had a bit of a South African accent.

In Year 6, I changed schools and made friends with a group of girls who saw beyond my deafness. We bonded over a mutual love of netball, touch footy and cricket. I poured myself into sport. It was one area of my life where I could excel without having to try harder than everyone else – you don't need to be able to hear to catch a ball. Buoyed by my activities and friendships, and by the unwavering support of my family, I became the most normal, contented, hearing-impaired person the world has ever known. Yes, I had to work harder

than other kids to keep up in the classroom. Yes, I worried that boys would never ask me out because I couldn't flirt with them on the phone (navigating the world of adolescent dating is miserable enough without the added trauma of hearing aids, and that is to say nothing of the humiliation that comes from having your big brother relay phone calls from boys asking you out on dates).

Of course, I yearned to know what music sounded like, or the reason for the delighted shrieks of laughter I'd see on people's faces. But I was happy. I came to prefer my silent world. Where other people had chaos and noise, I had peace and tranquillity. I learnt to intuit things, to read entire volumes in the body language of other people. I got to the point where I could tell what kind of a day someone was having – if they'd had a falling-out, if a relationship was in trouble – just by reading the stress in their shoulders. Beyond all that, I knew that the trials and tribulations that had accompanied my deafness also made me a stronger and more capable person. It was as if I had a secret leg up on the rest of the world – I could do anything they could do, despite not having their available tools.

Above: Olivia (left) with sister Sophie in Rome in 2004. Right: with Thomas on their wedding day in 2008. Far right: after her cochlear implant is switched on last November.

By my early 20s, I was living a happy and fulfilled life that most people would classify as charmed. I had graduated from university and had a job in the design department of a major fashion magazine. I worked hard during the day and partied at night – going out to bars and clubs and having fun with a group of girlfriends. There had been rumblings in the deaf community about cochlear implants – electronic devices that could give an authentic experience of better hearing to a deaf person. I was impressed by the invention, but was certain I didn't need one. I liked my life, just like it was. I felt completely at home in my quiet, happy world. Why fix what isn't broken?

In early 2001, I met Thomas at a bar in Sydney. I was there with a group of girlfriends and he was with colleagues. As we flirted, he tried to work out my accent. Was it South African? Dutch? I let him squirm a bit before letting him know about my deafness. When I told him, he just smiled. He'd never met a deaf person. Then he asked me to dance. I may not have been able to hear the music, but my sensitivity to the sound vibrations made me able to move and dance along with the best of them. But the music Thomas had asked me to dance to was slow, and I couldn't follow along. Thomas, who seemed to know and understand me right from the start, sensed this and pulled me close to him, tapping the rhythm of the music on my shoulder so I could follow along. I was sold.

I fell madly in love. Thomas was kind and caring, and he made me laugh until I thought my sides would split open. He took my deafness in his stride, intuitively

knowing how to make my life easier without making me feel less capable. Still, I was 21, and Thomas was 30 and at a completely different stage of life. So we broke up. Deep inside I think I knew Thomas was the person for me, but I also knew that if I gave my life over to him at that young age, I'd be resentful of him for the experiences I'd have missed out on. Heartbroken, I went to London in search of a life exciting enough to justify the great sacrifice that I'd made.

Finding work as a deaf person in a foreign country wasn't easy. Every company I applied to asked for my phone number. When I explained by email why I couldn't speak on the phone, employers who had seemed enthusiastic suddenly went radio silent. I had experience, I had a good university degree, but the people doing the hiring were convinced that a

Being deaf didn't stop me from having a normal childhood

hearing-impaired person was more than they wanted to deal with. Distraught but determined, I changed my strategy. Each morning I would put on my interview clothes and take my résumé to the streets, walking unannounced into the foyers of companies I wanted to work for. I'd introduce myself, hand over my résumé, and pray that someone would take the time to speak to me. Eventually, someone did. I got a job in the photo and design department of a health and lifestyle magazine and spent the next three years soaking up

the London lifestyle and travelling every chance I got. That time in my life was a dream come true. I travelled to New York for work assignments and went backpacking in Central America, Africa and around Europe. Once, while sitting around a camp fire during a tour in Tanzania, the light grew too dim to read the lips of my fellow backpackers. They each shared a torch, which they held to their faces as they spoke. We sat around like that, talking like we were a bunch of little kids telling scary stories. I felt I was seeing – and hearing – the world in an entirely unique way. Again, I thought to myself: What could a hearing world offer me that is better than this? I still missed Thomas, but I was otherwise happy.

By 2005, I'd had enough of my wanderlust and headed back to Australia. I sent an SMS to Thomas from the airport. During our time apart I'd grown certain that he was the person I was supposed to spend my life with. I'd taken a big risk leaving him the way I did, but luckily for me, absence had made his heart grow fonder, too. He flew to Sydney from Melbourne where he was now living and we had a romantic reunion. In the spring of 2008, we were married in Sydney followed by a reception cruising on the harbour. The weather was perfect and it was an idyllic night. Our wedding song was Bette Midler's "Wind Beneath My Wings". Again, Thomas tapped the rhythm of the song on my shoulder like he had the first day we met, and as we danced I wept quietly, certain I was the luckiest girl on the planet. We settled quickly into married life. I poured my heart and soul into my ►



Left: Thomas, Camilla and Olivia. "My life feels like a sound safari," she says. Above: the tiny implant that transformed her life. Right: playing and hearing the xylophone with Camilla for the first time.



work, setting up my own not-for-profit organisation called Hear For You, which provides mentoring and life skills workshops to deaf teenagers. Every time someone would broach the topic of the implant to me, I said the same thing: I don't want it, I don't need it. My hearing loss was part of who I was; I had no interest in changing something that felt like a crucial part of me.

Then, in 2009, I became pregnant. Knowing our baby was coming changed everything. I wanted the world for it. I yearned to protect it from every danger and sadness in life. I played out entire scenes from childhood long before I'd even met our daughter. I imagined us going to the movies and debating the plot afterwards. I pictured myself sitting on the bed, talking about school and friends. Somewhere in the midst of all this it hit me: I wanted to be able to hear this child. The implant started sounding like a better idea. In April 2010, Camilla was born. My love for her was so instant and profound that it almost knocked me over. It was physical, as if the entire chemistry of my body had shifted. On the day we took her home from the hospital, I decided to go for a cochlear implant and made an appointment with the Sydney Cochlear Implant Centre.

When Milla was seven months old, I went in for the first of the two procedures required for a cochlear implant. In the car on the way to the hospital for

the operation I was a bundle of nerves, gripping Thomas's hand so hard my knuckles turned white. I kept turning around to smile at Milla in her capsule, telling myself, "those smiles will one day become laughs. And those are laughs I want to hear." The operation was a success. A week later, we went to the Sydney Cochlear Implant Centre to have the implant switched on.

There are hundreds of videos on YouTube showing people with cochlear implants hearing for the first time. The children, women and men in them all share an eerily similar expression. Their faces are a multitude of emotions: terror, confusion, joy. As I sat in the room at the centre, Milla and Thomas beside me, listening to the audiologist say the first "hello", I felt all of those things. It was

"I wept with the joy of hearing my loved ones for the first time"

like someone had rung a bell in my chest, as though something alive inside of me was trying to escape. I'm still at a loss to describe it. Thomas placed Milla in my arms. As if on cue, she gave me a little squeal. It was so emotionally overwhelming, I thought I would burst. Thomas hugged me, his eyes huge, and said, "Big, big deal." Tears covered my cheeks. I wept with the joy of hearing my loved ones for the first time, with gratitude for the family who had made my hearing loss seem like a blessing, not a curse. I wept for the long, hard road I had travelled to get to that magical day. For every time I'd had to work twice as hard, for every missed word and insensitive joke. For the relief of knowing

– beyond a shadow of a doubt – that my decision had been the right one. I wept.

The amount of joy I felt in that moment is probably more than many people experience in a lifetime. And thank goodness for that, because the road from being a deaf person to being a hearing one is daunting. My brain has spent the past 30 years learning what things are without the aid of many aural signals. Now, I'm stuck in a limbo between the land of the hearing and the deaf. My brain hears things, but it has no idea how to classify the noises. Is that Milla crying? Or Thomas talking to me from the kitchen? Is that a happy noise, or a scary one? In time, I'll know for certain, but right now it's like I'm learning a strange and exotic language, while everyone else in the room assumes I'm fluent. Once, I jumped in fear at the sound of my own footsteps. Another time, I pulled over to the side of the road, convinced my car was about to blow up, only to learn it was the sound of the engine running. In moments like these I think to myself, "My goodness, this world is loud." But for every difficult step there is another equally precious one. My life feels like a sound safari.

Milla's gurgles are a thousand times better than I could have imagined them. After years of worshipping the shape and contours of his face, I've been delighted to discover that I also love the sound of Thomas's voice. Who knew I would be such a sucker for a Danish accent?

My fears that hearing would somehow rob me of my identity are for naught. I'm the same proud, determined woman that I've always been; married to the same wonderful man; mum to the same gorgeous daughter. The difference now is that I'm going to be able to hear as well as touch and see my many blessings. Life just got louder and clearer. And I really like the sound of that. ■