

Music Again! A Cochlear Implant Story

Bruce Daily is a counselor who works in Flint, Michigan. Bruce has experienced a hearing loss since childhood. He received a cochlear implant in March 2001. I had the privilege of interviewing Bruce by TTY on December 28, 2001. Bruce welcomes questions about Cochlear Implants. You may reach him by e-mail at dailyb@michigan.gov.

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JE: Bruce, when was the cochlear implant surgery (CI)?

BD: It was March 12, 2001 and the implant was activated, or turned on, one month later.

JE: Were you born with a hearing loss or was it a progressive loss?

BD: I became hearing impaired at age seven. The hearing loss progressed slowly from that point. I was able to use the telephone until I was about 19. I went through high school and college without knowing sign language or any other people who were deaf.

JE: How has the CI impacted your hearing now? You chose to have this conversation by TTY rather than a telephone, so how much better do you hear?

BD: I use the TTY mostly for my clients and it is difficult to hear some voices. If I am speaking with a stranger its easier to use the MRC or a TTY. I have only used the regular phone a few times. I'm still working on adjusting to that mode. I can hear 100% better than with hearing aids. When I watch TV I don't really need the captions. I also have less need for an interpreter at work. I believe if the second ear were implanted my hearing would be close to normal.

JE: Wow, that's fantastic! Were you completely deaf in both ears or only one?

BD: Both. I think the right ear was selected as I had many years of ringing in that ear, which has greatly improved due to the implant. They are doing some clinical trials with both ears implanted so that may be an option later.

JE: Let's talk about the social aspects. Does your wife have a hearing loss?

BD: Nancy is hearing and signs. She has found herself communicating with me from other rooms. When driving she can talk to me and I understand her, even at night. This was certainly not possible prior to the CI.

JE: That must be a relief. It seems that life would be easier.

BD: Yes, it has been. I can hear my children now.

JE: How does it feel to finally hear their voices?

BD: It is great! I had the surgery after seeing a program on PBS in which several people were profiled as CI candidates. My family encouraged me to do more research, as hearing aids were not helping me anymore. I have a great love for music and wanted to be able to hear music again. However, the first few months were not easy. Hearing returns slowly with mapping upgrades, etc.

JE: Could you explain more about that?

BD: The implant was not activated until one month after the surgery. I was hooked up to the computer at the clinic. As they programmed all 24 channels, the first thing I heard was tones like those in a hearing test. But when I went out of the clinic for lunch, it was like white noise. I almost gave up a few times. It was frustrating those first few weeks. Mapping is the process of selecting a range in which you detect and tolerate sounds, that's my layman version.

Sounds like my car turn signals were the first sounds I identified. My wife plays piano so when my back was turned I could hear keys being tapped. It has been very interesting. I am still learning new sounds and asking, "What is that noise?"

JE: To summarize, the device had to be programmed for a range of sounds and a range of noise levels, and this took time. Then, or simultaneously, you had to learn what the sounds were that you were hearing. Is that correct?

BD: Yes. I love a challenge, so I kept the speech processor on about 12 hours a day. It took about 4 months for me to understand speech again, but now I can. It is a little strange having this device on your head. Children show their curiosity. But I am comfortable with it now. I find

myself being very open with people about it. People ask questions, but no one has expressed any negative feedback to me.

JE: Even though you grew up using your hearing and speech, it still took 4 months until you could understand conversation after the CI. So if a consumer lost their hearing earlier than you did and had less experience with hearing and speech, it seems that it would take them much longer to learn to understand speech after a CI. Do you agree?

BD: Yes, the Lord has really blessed my life. I was able to hear until I was 7 years old, played musical instruments throughout grade school, sang in church, both solo and duets. I have always used my voice and most people understood me even though I was deaf. People tell me my speech has improved with the CI. It is important to remember that each of us is an individual and the CI will impact everyone a bit differently.

JE: Bruce, did you participate in any therapy after the CI such as speech therapy, auditory training or counseling?

BD: Nothing, I got through this by myself. But I think people could benefit from counseling, as the sound doesn't return overnight. Support groups might be helpful for younger consumers. It's not easy for teens to be different from their peers in any way.

JE: To wrap this up, I have one more question. What is the best thing for you, personally, about having had the CI?

BD: Being able to play guitar again and sing after more than 40 years. One of the first things I did was to buy a guitar. I collect vintage guitars and have seven now. I performed a few months ago at a recital and did okay. It's coming back to me.

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Bruce reports that since the interview he has had the great pleasure of performing with his son at a recital. He explains, "Joe is a gifted singer, guitarist and songwriter who plays semi-professionally while attending college. I have just recently started taking piano lessons, and am making some progress. My plan is to find opportunities to perform more often, perhaps at nursing homes and other venues."