

## **Katherine**

My background - basically, I come from a hearing family. When I say a hearing family, I mean my immediate family they are all hearing: grandparents, cousins, they are all hearing. I am the only deaf person. So, for my parents it was a real shock. I was diagnosed age three; I have two older sisters both hearing. My parents knew something was not quite right. The difference was when I went along for the normal hearing test, it was "This child is deaf. She must immediately go off to the hospital...", and my poor mum drove across central London and took me to Mayday Hospital.

I would say that from the age of 3 up to 23, when I finished my Master's Degree at the University of Southampton, it was all about what does Katherine need. My parents didn't exactly have a book. They went out to the medical profession, education profession: what does Katherine need in order to achieve? How can we help Katherine? What was the right opportunity for me?

They actually offered me a cochlear implant [as a child] and that must have been a really difficult decision for my parents to have made, for any parents, but I think it was the right decision, mainly because the technology wasn't there, and I did have useful hearing. They made that decision after a long, a long time for me not to have the cochlear implant then, but actually carry on in mainstream school, because they felt ultimately it was a decision I could make for myself later on, and that's what I did.

So, what then led me to the cochlear implant? I would say, I had just finished my Masters and I was starting my first proper job working at the Southampton General Hospital. I was 24 when I woke up one morning, I put my hearing aid in and I couldn't hear anything.

I came here to the implant centre, and they put me through a series of tests, and that is when I started having the real conversations with the experts in the room - thinking this could be something for me. I had [a sudden drop] hearing loss [on the left side], that didn't mean it couldn't happen to my right ear too, the one that I did have some useful hearing. What happens if it did? So I was ready to start thinking about this major change. Let's be honest - it is a major change, and the technology was right for me to have this major change. So I took a deep breath, and had the operation at Queen Alexandra in June 2011.

When they first switched me on, they had warned me that it may be beeping and they were right, that's what happened. I had some beeping and then within six weeks, I then started to recognise objects. So things sounded like beeping, like a clock, I couldn't work out what it

was, but then it just sounds like a clock. There was some beeping when I was in the kitchen; it turned out to be the fridge telling me off that I hadn't shut the door. Between six weeks to two to three months, that's when my brain started to recognise objects and I was able to connect objects to what they were.

I would say it took three to six months for the brain to start to realise what [the sounds] were and everything became natural. I would definitely say that within six months, I was basically in a place where I didn't need to even think about it, it was starting to become very natural, my speech was improving, I was more confident about wearing the equipment, I wasn't worried about breaking anything.

And now, five years on, I am more confident in group surroundings. I have always been sociable, I do like to go out to the pub with my friends. But I would say professionally that's where the difference was made. I can pick up the phone and I don't think about it, I can do conference calls - it's challenging, I get some things wrong - but I am able to lead and chair meetings. I head up a team at the moment of about 20 people across Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth, Surrey and Sussex, so I have got a large team of people working in the NHS. Particularly working in the NHS now, you have to demonstrate leadership, and those leadership skills come from confident communication, and that's where the cochlear implant has made that little bit of difference.

It's also made me confident to try things I hadn't tried before. I love driving fast cars, so I did a couple of track days, driving a Ferrari, Maserati, really good fun, even wearing the helmet, even though it is a bit of a squeeze, it was absolutely fine, it was good fun! The other thing I have tried - I just flew a plane! I did one flying lesson, brilliant fun. I wore the headphones and [initially] I could not understand what the pilot was saying, but over time actually the brain was mapping it, and I was able to have a conversation between him and air traffic control - I might not have understood everything but I was able to have a communication, recognise what they were saying and fly a plane!