

OPINION**Cochlear implant opens up a whole new world**

(Editor's note: Marie Younkin Waldman of Narragansett, who has suffered from profound hearing loss for many years, underwent a cochlear implant in her right ear at UMass Memorial Hospital in Worcester, Mass., on May 11. After about a month of recuperation, the implant was activated. What follows are her thoughts on how this procedure has changed her life.)

By Marie Younkin Waldman
Narragansett

I had my cochlear implant activation today at UMass Audiology in Worcester with Eva Bero, audiologist.

The world did not change in an instant for me and it may have been a little disappointing for my family. I had prepared myself ahead of time for this first time as some had warned me. By the time we left Eva's office I was a little more comfortable. I walked outside and the cars sounded OK. We went to a cafe and it wasn't too bad. Then [my husband] Myron and I were driving home and all of a sudden my voice sounded more normal to me and I was not whispering anymore. Myron said it sounded better. We put the radio on and I could actually decipher some of the weather forecast and other things on talk radio. Then Myron's voice came out of a fog and I could actually hear him when I wasn't facing him! It was getting better. On the way home we had to go to [a] granddaughter's preschool graduation, and I have to say that the whole time in that huge room full of people I heard a ragtime piano player playing off tune in my ear. It was a little nerve-wracking. Myron says it is the brain trying to find something it can relate to when it hasn't used these nerve endings in such a long time. I guess my brain relates to off-tune ragtime piano players, but I certainly don't...

I just went out in the garden and stood there mesmerized. Guess what? I heard the birds! It brought tears to my

eyes. I have not heard the birds since I wore my first hearing aid about 36 years ago. It was wonderful to hear their high-pitched little voices filling the voids with their chirping.

Thursday I went for my second mapping in Worcester and Eva, the audiologist, tested me and I got 100 percent of the words on the first board that she spoke in a normal voice as she had her mouth covered. Then she decided to do a more difficult board of words with me that she does not ordinarily do after two days of activation, and I only missed one! It was "bus" and "box" and it was because of the "s" sound. Eva was very happy and said that I am doing really well. My friend, Judy, who was with me, started to cry.

What can I say? It is an exciting new life for me. Tonight I made my first phone calls with my implant ear on my Captel phone. I called my daughter, Joy, and could hear and understand her voice although it did sound different. Then I called [my daughter] Dawne and heard her voice but different also. ...

I thought I would try to see if I could sing. I grabbed the Broadway song book and started in. First it was "All I Ask of You" from "Phantom," and I really think I hit those high notes. Then I tried "Memory," one of my favorite songs as I walked around the kitchen singing to myself and evaluating my success. Then I went on to "Climb Ev'ry Mountain," a song I had always related to. I ran into the other room and tried all the piano keys to see which ones I could hear. Before the implant I could not hear any of the high notes above the middle octave range. Now I can hear every single one of the high frequency notes! Oh what ecstasy! Maybe my dreams of singing on Broadway are not over after all at the age of 63. What new mountains will there be to climb ahead in my life? Watch out everyone, I will at least be able to make another debut at True Brew Cafe!

There is another strange thing that is



PHOTO: MICHAEL DERR

Marie Younkin Waldman, relaxing at her home in Narragansett, can enjoy the many sounds of daily life again - from singing birds to talk radio.

happening to me. I am waking up more easily with more joy in my heart each morning. Eva says it is because I had such a profound hearing loss before that it took so much energy out of me every day just to work my way through the day to communicate with everyone or to try to listen. This was difficult, and I was probably weary and sometimes even depressed. I am now excited to get up, and I look forward to see what the day is going to bring and what I will hear and the new things I will learn on the radio or from people.

It makes the whole world more interesting for me and, of course, more exciting. There is new energy in me and I can feel it. I think it shows on the outside also as I am getting positive comments from others.

I think about my mother sometimes at this juncture in my hearing progress. My mother has been gone since 1983, but when I was a little girl she spent many days taking me to audiologists all

around the country, and I have a memory of taking the same tests over and over again. "Say the word 'baseball,' say the word 'hot dog.'" I think I probably memorized them all. After my Mom found out I had a hearing loss when I was a young child, she did everything in her power to help me. She read everything, contacted experts and prepared the way with my teachers and finally put me in a private [high school]. She reminded me to lower my voice, to enunciate, and she let me take dramatic arts lessons as a teen to learn more about speech and drama. How I wish she could see me now. She would be so happy to know that I am going to have nearly normal experiences now with communication. I must think that she does know and expect that she is up there looking down at me and marveling at this wonderful technology that is the miracle allowing me to hear so much better. God bless my Mom.

Sometimes I forget I can hear. Like

when I'm walking around in the living room and I hear the man on the radio talking about how great the Mitsubishi cars are in a commercial. I am so used to hearing just muffled "sounds" as voices on the radio that I find myself stopping and wondering where "that voice" is coming from. Oh, and I can't wait to hear the voice of "that other man" in our bedroom, where Myron installed the emergency storm radio system that tells what storms are headed our way. It was just unintelligible talking before, so that I wondered why it was in our bedroom in the first place, but I guess Myron can understand it. I will have to wait for a tornado or hurricane, I guess, to get that voice down. ...

This morning I was out in my garden and I heard this terrible ringing in my ear. I was looking all around to try to identify the sound. Finally, I looked up in the air and a plane was flying overhead. It's like that now but it will get better. Planes without ringing are in my future. I can't recognize cars yet while I am on my walk but I do hear a ringing when they are coming near me. ...

As I write this on my computer in the cozy corner of my sunroom surrounded by the large pink geranium plants in the opposite corner and the garden outside starting to fill with red and light pink roses, I can actually hear the soft classical music on the radio that is located just inside the other room. And there is no ringing accompaniment! And to think that I couldn't even hear anything that was in another room before! Life is continuing on with its many miracles.

(Editor's note: Professor Nancy Shuster of Narragansett, who has had the same procedure as Marie Younkin Waldman, has formed a free support group, the Rhode Island Cochlear Implant Group, which will hold its first meeting July 16 from 7 to 9 p.m. at Narragansett Public Library. For more information, e-mail her at Nshu4@aol.com.)