# MEET MY SISTER

■ BY ANNIE O'MALLEY

Kathie Plotkin is a Garnet Valley resident who was born completely deaf due to our mother contracting German Measles (Rubella) during her pregnancy. The first of seven children (I am number five), Kathie was born in the 1960s, before the cochlear implant device was available. As a child, she was put in the special education program of the public school system. She was forced to wear hearing aids and to take speech therapy. "The hearing aids were uncomfortable and did not work, and the speech therapy made her feel like a failure because she was unable to replicate the sounds," Annie recalled.

At eight, Kathie was introduced to American Sign Language by visiting teachers from the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. She soon began thriving. "Sign language gave me a voice," Kathie signed. "I finally could communicate with other people in a language that felt natural to me. Once I learned American Sign Language and could communicate authentically with other Deaf people, I felt like I found my place in the world."

Our parents were eventually able to move Kathie to the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. Kathie commuted two hours to school each way every day, until finally settling in as a resident student in high school. After graduation, Kathie continued her education at Gallaudet University in Washington DC, the only liberal arts college for the Deaf in the world, and eventually graduated from Temple University with a bachelor's degree in information technology.

Kathie has no regrets about choosing American Sign Language as her native language and Deaf (capital "D" implies a culturally deaf person) as her identity. "If you offered Kathie a pill that could make her hear, she would refuse it," Annie said. "The only thing Kathie would like to see change is for society to be more inclusive of Deaf people and to embrace Deaf culture. A great start would be for hearing people to learn sign language rather than trying to fix what they perceive as broken."

**What's more important – a person or that person's sense of hearing?** That may seem like an odd question to ponder, but it's at the heart of a complex and controversial debate that's been raging within the Deaf community ever since the invention and use of cochlear implants in the 1980s [see box].

For the hearing world, this medical technology has seemingly and miraculously "cured" deafness, but that's not the whole story. In many cases, it's not even the true story, which is why many deaf people choose not to have cochlear implants in the first place or opt to have them surgically removed, as well as decide not to have cochlear implants for their children.

"So many people have seen videos of a deaf person or child hearing for the first time," signed Kathleen Plotkin. "The person gasps and smiles or sometimes laughs and cries in delight. For the hearing world, that's the end of the story, and it has a happy ending."

For a deaf person, getting a cochlear implant is the first step on an often difficult path. Most people who get the implants launch into several years of speech therapy to help them learn how to distinguish words.

"There's so much ambient noise in our world," said Annemarie O'Malley, Kathie's sister and professor at Neumann University. "We've learned how to block that out and focus on speech, but this rush of sounds is often overwhelming to a deaf person hearing for the first time."

Annie also pointed out that cochlear implants don't replicate natural hearing. Voices can sound squeaky or robotic, and there's no sense of direction as far as being able to tell where a sound is coming from. "At first, we had no idea what the sound quality was like because deaf people had no comparison so they couldn't tell us," Annie said. "But once hearing people who had lost their sense of hearing got these implants, they could report back and let us know that it's not the same."

Kathie signed that she has friends in the Deaf community who had so many problems with the implants that they decided to have them removed. "A woman I know struggled for months with headaches and ringing in her ears after she had the surgery," she signed. "She suffered for months, hoping it would get better, but it didn't. Once she had the implant taken out, all her symptoms went away."

Other deaf friends who got the cochlear implants found it exhausting to participate in the hearing world, particularly when it came to listening to speech. In addition, people with cochlear implants find it harder (or not possible in some cases) to do things like fly on planes, go swimming, or get an MRI. In addition, the devices themselves sometimes break or malfunction. "The batteries can die," Kathie signed.

### Let's Talk about the Kids

For Kathie, a far more important advancement in her life came with the Americans with Disability Act (ADA). Kathie has four adult children; she gave birth to her first two before the ADA went into effect and two after the act was passed in 1990. "For my first two babies, I was in the delivery room without an interpreter, but, fortunately, my mother was there, so she could communicate with me and relay my questions to the doctor and nurses," she signed. "For my last two babies, an interpreter was there each time because this was mandated by law."

Although none of Kathie's children are deaf, she still taught all of them how to sign so they could communicate with her. Kathie signed that hearing parents of deaf children should still teach their children sign language, as well as learn it themselves. "Whether a child has an implant or not, the child is still deaf and should learn sign language," she signed.

Ironically, even though some deaf children with cochlear implants are not taught to sign, many hearing parents are teaching their hearing babies sign language — a parenting trend that began in the 1980s and really took hold by the early

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2000s. Both Kathie and Annie agreed that this is a wonderful phenomenon because it leads to better parent-child communication, gives a jumpstart on language comprehension, and can even result in higher IQs. "This is really great that some parents do this," Kathie signed. "I just wish they'd continue it because so many people could benefit from knowing sign language. They could sign to deaf people, but they could also use it themselves if they ever lost their own hearing due to an accident or old age."

### Technological Advancements

Even though Kathie wouldn't want a cochlear implant herself, it would be unfair to label her a Luddite. She uses the IT skills she learned in college in her role as one of the founding members of DeafCan (Deaf Community Action Network), a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people who are deaf, deaf and blind, and hard of hearing. Operating out of the Christ the King Church in West Chester, Kathie teaches sign language classes, offers private tutoring, and organizes fundraisers for DeafCan, as well as serves as an advocate and an interpreter.

Kathie signed that the best technological breakthrough for the Deaf community has been smartphones. "Everyone can type a note for me to read instead of scrabbling around to find a pen and paper," she explained. "Plus, I can text everyone, and the very best thing is FaceTime because that means I can sign and talk with all four of my adult children."

FaceTime allows Kathie to sign and talk with other family members. "Growing up, my whole family learned sign language so we could communicate with Kathie," Annie said, explaining that she had obtained her teaching degree in Spanish, but listed fluency in sign language on her resume. That landed her a job at Neumann University.

Now 23 years later, Annie is still teaching American Sign Language. "Thanks to the support of our current dean, Dr. Al Mueller, Neumann University is one of the few colleges that allows American Sign Language classes to fulfill the language requirement for graduation," she said, noting that Dr. Mueller also supports experiential and service-oriented learning opportunities. "He embraces Neumann's Franciscan mission that knowledge is a gift to be shared in the service of others."

A nursing student at Neumann, who is taking sign language as her foreign language, commented that being able to sign could be the difference between life and death for a deaf patient.

Kathie agreed and said she wished that more service personnel and first responders knew how

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to sign. Annie pointed out that even though most of the hearing world does not sign, her sister is more than capable of getting around. "Students in my class must have a lunch date with Kathie, either by themselves or in a small group, she said, adding that she does not go along as the interpreter. "The students must use their signing skills in the real world, and it shows them how self-sufficient Deaf people can be. Kathie points to what she wants on menus. She is one of the most capable people I know."

Kathie signed that she participates in the hearing world all the time, and the hearing world should feel free to engage with her and other deaf people. "Hearing people should not be afraid of deaf people — they should wave hello and feel free to text and talk with us," she said.

Annie reflected on her long career. "Learning and teaching sign language has not only given me a deeper appreciation of Deaf culture, but I also have a much closer bond with Kathie," she said.

Kathie smiled at this remark and answered the question about what is more important — the person or that person's sense of hearing. "Hearing really doesn't matter," she said. "I am what matters."

According to the Mayo Clinic, a cochlear implant is an electronic device that uses a sound processor (worn behind the ear) along with a receiver (implanted under the skin behind the ear). Sound waves picked up from the processor are sent to the receiver, which sends the signals to electrodes implanted into the inner ear. These stimulate the auditory nerve, which then directs the signals to the brain, and the brain interprets those signals as sounds.

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>
> **— Kathie Plotkin**

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