

Chapel Talk by Anna Davies '11—Westover School

“Can- you- hear- me?” That is exactly what someone asked after I mentioned that I am deaf even though we have been talking for 10 minutes. I respond, “Yes, I can thank you,” but really I want to say “No I have been miraculously guessing what you have been saying.” But I think that would have been a little rude especially since the person had good intentions.

Okay, maybe I should step back and explain. For those of you who don't know, my name is Anna. I am a junior day student who is a proud Over. Even though having a whole chapel talk about Overs would be awesome, I am going to be talking to you about a unique thing about myself. I am completely deaf, but I wear two cochlear implants that allow me to hear. Cochlear implants are complicated to explain, but basically there are two pieces: the internal piece that requires surgery and the external piece. The external piece picks up the sound and then relays it up a coil and through a magnet that is placed over the internal piece. The internal piece then translates that sound in a way that my brain will understand, and well, I hear!

In simple terms, there is a little computer inside of my head yet my head is like a refrigerator. Seriously, I can stick a regular magnet on my head and it stays there. In fact, sometimes if I stand next to a certain metal, the metal sticks right to my head and does not want to come off!

How did I become deaf? We are not positive, but we think that the chicken pox, which I had when I was 18 months old, ruined my tiny hairs that pick up sound on my cochlea, and therefore, my cochlea can't hear for me. Before my cochlear implant, I tried the hearing aid but it only made things loud not clear. So, now my cochlear implants are my ears.

After I had my first surgery, which was when I was two and half, I had to readjust to the hearing world. I remember for the longest time that I hated flushing toilets and would always run from the room before I heard the sound. It also took me some time to learn to talk. In fact, I had to go to speech therapy twice a week in Eastern Connecticut the following years after my surgery. By the time elementary school rolled around, I was going to speech therapy only once a week but instead of taking Spanish with the rest of the class, I would have work on idioms and vocabulary with my para professional. I hated this after all there are only so many confusing idioms a kid could learn and retain. To this day, “raining cats and dogs” still remains my favorite. But all the hard work definitely paid off in the end. When I was in seventh grade, I finally was independent and did not need this extra time with a para anymore.

When people find out that I am deaf, they usually are surprised. For a deaf person, I have pretty good hearing and speech. I mean don't get me wrong my hearing and speech definitely isn't perfect. My many “whats” are evidence. However, I really as cliché as it is have to thank my parents for how well I speak and hear.

They were the ones who noticed my hearing loss and brought me to countless specialists. They were the ones who brought me to NYU hospital, which has one of the best cochlear implant surgery programs in the world, to have my surgery and found me a great audiologist, whom I am still with today. They were the ones who brought me to this audiologist and her group called NECHEAR countless times throughout my childhood for a check up and speech therapy. They were the ones that constantly talked to me so that I could learn to hear and to speak. They were the ones who fought for me to have the best. Wow, that is many Mother and Father's day gifts right there to compensate for. That could be a problem.

As much as I can usually hear, sometimes, I have a great difficulty hearing. It is very frustrating for me to hear in a place where there are many background noises. For example, the dining hall can be difficult, but at the same time it is good because there is a carpet so there are fewer echoes. It is also difficult for me to understand someone who is quiet, a fast talker, or a mumblor. One of my pet peeves is when people hold their hand over their mouth or turn away from me. Because a) I can't understand them and b) I can't see their lips. I am not a really good lip reader compared to other deaf people but reading lips definitely helps me fill in some gaps. Lip reading is definitely a skill everyone should have. I mean you get to see people who are on the other side of the room talk maybe about secret things. You can also catch people swearing under their breath when they shouldn't be. For instance, I always catch coaches whether in real life or on TV quietly cursing at refs.

I know that when I say "what" it can be annoying. But I promise you that it is much more frustrating for me because it is so difficult to be in the dark. Have you ever been with a group of people who suddenly burst out laughing at a joke that you didn't hear? And then it is so hard to get their attention to tell that hysterical joke again. Well, then welcome to my world. I understand that it can be hard to tell the joke again through the laughter but it still is frustrating for me to miss something especially a good joke. However, one benefit that I learned is nodding and smiling always fools people into believing you heard them.

As hard as being deaf can be, there are definitely major benefits. For instance, if my mother is yelling at me yet again about my room, I can always ignore her and pretend I can't hear her, and eventually she goes away. It works like a charm. Also, have you ever had a sleepover where there is this person who snores up a storm or just talks nonsense really loudly in her sleep? Well, I can happily say that is never a problem for me. When I sleep, I take my cochlear implants off and there is complete silence. I can even sleep right through a thunderstorm. Another benefit is the cool gadgets. The obvious one is of course the actual cochlear implant, which is a miracle in itself. Another known gadget is the microphone that the teachers wear. The microphone helps me hear the teacher clearly not only in class but also in the hall having secret meetings with other teachers during class. It really is unfortunate that Westover teachers never have secret meetings during class. Another cool gadget that some people may not know is my alarm. My alarm, instead of having an obnoxious sound, shakes my bed and flashes the light. In fact, a couple of times my

dreams have been interrupted by the earthquake of my alarm. How cool is that.

Some people say that being deaf is a disability and that drives me crazy. I know this is going to sound like a cliché but being deaf has really made me a different person than if I weren't deaf. For instance, I am more determined to succeed because I am used to people saying that I can't do something. When my mother was taking me to specialists, she ran into an older woman who was apparently a great neurosurgeon. This woman confirmed my mother's beliefs that I was deaf. Then instead of comforting my mother who had thought this was the end of my life at the time, this woman then said, "She can always be a seamstress." To this day, I wish I could see this woman and show her that I can talk and am not "disabled" as she thought I would be. But I think she is dead now. Being deaf has also taught me to stick up for myself. For instance, I can't be afraid to ask someone to repeat or to speak loud or slower. Also, I had to learn to ask for accommodations such as closed captioning or a good seat whether the seat is up front at a lecture or by the wall at a noisy restaurant. Being deaf has also taught me to be a good listener.

Because I can't just expect to hear all the words without trying, I really have to focus and pay attention to the speaker so that I do not miss anything. I also think that I am more aware of things and people than I would be if I weren't deaf, because I had to learn to understand my surroundings. Often when I enter a room, I take note of things that may be a problem like a floor without a carpet or loud background noises. I am also sensitive to other people because facial expression as well as lip reading helps me understand what someone is trying to say. Because I am deaf, I value differences, and I am really curious about these differences. I really love differences because of my own. Speaking of differences, people often ask me if I feel different. Honestly, I usually forget that I am deaf, and then I have an "oh yeah" moment. I still think it is weird that I can choose not to hear any sounds if I want to.

But yes, sometimes I do feel different only because I have to work harder to hear and I have to make myself known so that I can understand what is going on.

Despite all of the adversity or because of that, I am really proud to be deaf. Of course, I have those days where I feel so limited. But eventually, I realize that no, I am not limited. I just have to make a new path for myself. And that is okay. In fact, that is great. After all, where would we be if we were all the same? Therefore, everyone should embrace the difference she has and explain that difference to others. My deafness is the difference that I treasure. And I am honored to have shared my experience with you all and, hopefully, will continue to do so.