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Evans brings the gift of sound to kids and adults

By Jeff Troth, MEDDAC PAO



For many of us tuning out noises around us would be welcomed. But for the hearing impaired being able to hear the smallest of sounds is something to smile at.

Nine-year-old Christian Winkler's smile was bigger than it had ever been in his life after getting Bone Anchored Hearing Aids, or BAHA, implanted in his skull at the beginning of the year at Evans Army Community Hospital.

"When he first got it done he walked around the hospital and he was able to hear footsteps for the first time in his life," said MaryEllen Winkler, his mother. "He was just totally amazed by that. I am just so thankful for this program to be here for him and other kids and adults."

Evans began offering this procedure a year ago, and so far 12 people have received the gift of sound from Evans. One of those is Patricia Nelsen, who began losing her hearing at age six due to chronic ear infections.

"When I was 14, I developed a hole in my ear drum because of the infections. The doc just couldn't save it, so I had three bones and my ear drum removed," said Nelsen. "In 2014, I had reconstructive surgery to rebuild my ear drum and to try and bring some of my hearing back."

She said about a year after the surgery she started losing her hearing again. So at the end of 2015 when she was told she was a good candidate for the BAHA she jumped at it. In January she had a hearing aid attached.

"When I first got the BAHA hearing implant I walked out of the docs office and started balling my eyes out." Nelsen said. "I could hear people walking down the hall, people laughing below me on the next floor. Stuff I was never able to experience before."

This new experience continued on the car ride home as she asked her husband what certain noises were – things she hadn't heard in over 25 years. But, the most crying she did that day was when she got home.

"As I walked into my house, my soft spoken 2-year-old came running up to me and said 'momma can you hear me now'. I started balling my eyes out yet again because for the first time in her whole life I was able to hear her voice," she said.

The joy the patients feel is shared by hospital staff who have helped them hear.

"It is very gratifying to be able to do this service and great being part of their wonderful experience," said Maj. (Dr.) Michael Wilhelm, who performed the implant procedures for Christian and Nelsen. "It is a new thing to be able to offer this type of a surgery at a facility of our size. Normally a patient would have to go to a medical center, like Brooke (Army Medical Center at Joint Base San Antonio, Texas) or Madigan (Army Medical Center at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.) to get this done."

Not all with hearing loss are good candidates for the BAHA implants. Wilhelm said that someone who is deaf or has significant hearing loss in one or both ears would qualify for this operation.

"In the case of Christian, he has no ears (due to a birth defect) so he has no way for sound to get to his inner ear," the doctor said. "The Bone Anchored Hearing Aids bypass the fact that he has no ears, or ear canals, and allow him to hear normally."

According to Wilhelm, the BAHA bypasses the hearing bones and outer ear and "basically vibrates the skull" and the person's body interprets those vibrations as sound.

Prior to receiving the BAHA implants, Christian always had to wear a baseball cap that his hearing aids were attached to. His ball caps were such a part of his life that every picture he drew of himself, he was wearing a ball cap. Christian said he is now getting used to drawing hair.

His drawings aren't the only things that have changed after receiving his implants.

“It is awesome and more fun not having to wear my baseball cap,” said Christian, who is looking forward to Halloween. “Before, I had to wear a baseball cap all the time or else I couldn’t hear, so I couldn’t wear a mask or regular hat. I’m not sure what I am going to be this year, but it will be something with a mask or a hat.”

“Everything has been amazing since the surgery. When he had the baseball cap he said it still sounded like he was underwater,” said MaryEllen Winkler. “And now he says he can hear clearly and the TV volume doesn’t have to be on 53 anymore. Now, he even comes when I call him.”



During a follow-up appointment Maj. (Dr.) Michael Wilhelm checks to see how Christian Winkler’s right Bone Anchored Hearing Aid is doing. (Photo by Jeff Troth)