

“Playing” it Forward

Ryan Pate is a 15-year-old high school sophomore—and sports enthusiast—from Anchorage, Alaska. Not long after our first annual young adult issue of *Hearing Loss Magazine* was published (November/December 2016) we got an email from Ryan’s mother Sara that said, “I would like to tell you how much we enjoyed the young adult issue. My teenage son Ryan has unilateral hearing loss and he enjoyed learning about other kids with similar issues. I hope it motivates him to be all he can be.”

Since personal stories are such a powerful tool for people to find support and to let them know they are not alone in their hearing loss journey, we asked Ryan to share *his* story for this year’s young adult issue. And maybe, just maybe, Ryan can impact another young person’s life just as his life was impacted, and motivate them to be all they can be. Thank you, Ryan, for sharing your story and *paying* it forward.

Most people don't know what it's like to be deaf in one ear.

My name is Ryan Pate, and I was born with unilateral hearing loss. This means that I can hear out of only one ear. I have learned that there are pros and cons to living with unilateral hearing loss. The pros of having one good ear are that I need only one earplug, and my other senses are sharper than those of people with two good ears. The cons are that it is difficult for me to focus on people who I'm talking to when there is a lot of background noise, and that I misunderstand words very easily.

I was born in Fairbanks, Alaska. Right after I was born I had a mandatory hearing assessment (Universal Newborn Hearing Screening). The assessment showed that I had no hearing in my left ear and that I would probably not be

able to hear out of it for the rest of my life. One time I had so much fluid buildup that I was temporarily deaf in my right ear as well, so doctors put tubes in to help drain them. Thankfully the tubes worked and the hearing in my right ear was restored.

Learning to Adjust, Adjusting to Learn

When I was in daycare and grade school I spent a lot of time around other kids, but never realized I could not hear as well as they could. I only noticed my hearing loss when there were loud noises or when I didn't respond when people called my name.

The latter proved to be an obstacle for me at times, as teachers would think I was purposely ignoring them. But once my teachers found out I had a hearing loss they would seat me in the front of the class with quiet people so I could hear what they were saying.

School was always a challenge for me. I wouldn't be able to hear the teacher if there were distractions such as other students talking or if the teacher was facing the board instead of the class. Some teachers used a microphone that connected to a speaker so their voices would be amplified, which helped keep me from getting distracted and made it easier for me to learn.

One of my biggest childhood struggles was when my family moved from Fairbanks to Anchorage when I was five. It was easy for me to make friends because we lived in a small, tight-knit neighborhood. My friends and I liked to play outside, but our new house was on a busy street, and people were often speeding and not watching out for little kids. Because of my hearing loss I couldn't tell which direction cars were coming from, making it dangerous for me to play near the street.

So to get drivers to slow down my parents started a petition to get speed bumps installed on our street. Fortunately, the petition was successful and the speed bumps were put in, which helped make it a lot safer for me to play outside.

Another challenge for me was when I started playing baseball in second grade. The coaches would give us directions, such as when to bat or where to play, but I couldn't hear them at all. This was a big problem, and I think it kept me from improving. But with the help of my family I was able to succeed. My dad became a coach for my team from second to fifth grade, and with his help I could hear all of the directions and began to improve.

Getting Help From Technology

When I was in fifth grade I got a Baha (a bone anchored hearing implant). A Baha works by attaching a processor to an implant that is surgically placed just under the skin. But before I had the surgery done I was able to try out a type of Baha that uses a headband to keep the processor in place. It is similar to a permanent one, but not as powerful. I wore the Baha with the headband for a year. Then when I was in sixth grade I got the titanium implant. The surgery was done in the spring so my implant would heal by the time school started in the fall.

That summer, I played baseball again, even though I was still healing from my surgery. However, I had to get a new helmet that would protect my implant. Once, during an all-star tryout, my head started hurting, even with the help of my helmet. This gave me a massive headache and prevented me from hitting well. The manager knew I could hit better than that so after the tryout he asked my dad what was wrong. My dad explained that my implant was hurting so badly it affected my batting.

Fortunately, even with the difficult tryout, I made the team. The coach told all the players that we were picked because we were team players. But after that incident I wore a small cap over my implant to keep the swelling down and prevent headaches, which helped a lot. In fact, I ended up being one of the best batters in the tournament!

By the time seventh grade started my implant had healed and I was able to wear the Baha. But after wearing it for about six months scar tissue started to grow over it. My doctor said this happens to about one in every five people who receive the implant. Getting the skin to stop growing required medical treatment and took several months, during which time I couldn't wear my Baha, or my third ear as I call it.

Support from Coaches and Teammates

I started playing Pop Warner football when I was 14. That also had some challenges. I had to get a special helmet so the padding would not be directly on my ear, and when we first started practicing and being assigned positions, I had to talk

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“ Even though it is sometimes hard to learn at the same pace as others, if you work hard enough everything will work out in the end. ”



Ryan made the varsity baseball team as a freshman in high school

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with my coach about being put in a position close to the ball so I could hear when it was kicked, which limited the number of positions I could play.

Even though playing football had its challenges I was fortunate that I also had a lot of support. My coach had me play defensive end the entire season, which is close to the ball. My coaches also helped me memorize the plays for defense, and my teammates helped with the offensive plays for my position. Having support from both my coaches and teammates allowed me to feel like I was really part of the team and it also helped me improve.

Along with football, I am also continuing to play baseball. In fact, last year (my freshman year in high school) my school started a baseball program, which they never had before. There was only one team, but it was varsity, and I was lucky enough to make it. My goal is to be one of the first players to earn a varsity letter in baseball for all four years of high school and then continue to play in college.

One thing about playing baseball with a hearing loss is there are a lot of non-verbal signs used during the game. During the game coaches will give signals for such things as

batting, base running and pitching. This really helps me and allows me to be the best player I can be.

Last summer my family got a dog, a mix of American and European border collie that we named Diego. In addition to playing sports myself I am also teaching Diego to play a sport called flyball. Flyball includes two teams of four dogs each (with their respective handlers), with one team running against the other. The dogs run over hurdles to a box, push off the box while simultaneously grabbing a ball, and then run back over hurdles past the next dog so it can begin its turn. When the dogs finish they are rewarded with treats or a ball. Flyball is hard for a dog to play, but as difficult as it is Diego loves playing and I find being his handler very rewarding.

Support in School

I am currently a sophomore at Grace Christian School (GCS), a small, private school in Anchorage, where I have been since seventh grade (it is K-12).

Even though I now have my Baha, which helps a lot, school still has its challenges. There are times when I can't hear my teachers and miss getting the homework assignment or important notes for a test or quiz, especially when other kids are talking. In most of my classes, I sit up front so I can hear better. My biology, Bible, history, and computer science teachers are very loud so I can hear every word they say, which allows me to sit in the middle or to the side of the class. My most difficult class is Spanish, because I have trouble hearing the correct pronunciation of the words. Sometimes, what I hear can be quite funny. One time a pastor said he just finished seminary school. I thought he said cemetery school!

I like GCS because of the small class sizes and supportive teachers, coaches, and friends. If I can't hear something I just ask for it to be repeated or sometimes my friends will help by telling me what was said.

The most important thing I can tell someone with a hearing loss is don't be afraid to self-advocate, even if it is something as simple as asking a teacher, coach, or anyone else to repeat what they said. Even though it is sometimes hard to learn at the same pace as others, if you work hard enough everything will work out in the end.

Sometimes having a hearing loss can be a challenge, but my faith in God has grown and it helps me overcome the obstacles that I face. I have found a great church and youth group, where I have met some amazing people and made many friends. God has provided me with a great group of friends who help me both in and out of school, and I am grateful to now have a better chance of hearing things in the big, loud world. **HLM**



Ryan and his dog Diego