

Last fall my wife Shell and I attended a drama showcase presented at our kids' school. This was not a full-blown production of a play; rather, it was a sort of informal warm up – a series of single-act pieces and improvisational exercises intended to let the middle school drama troupe get familiar with the stage and experience performing in front of an audience.

The result was about what one would expect for a group of middle schoolers their first time out: a bit of nervousness, some minor flubs, a few funny moments, and the odd flash of cleverness.

The audience was pretty friendly, being made up mostly of teachers, parents, and siblings of the actors. They all clapped politely at the end.

All, that is, except for Shell and me. We clapped vigorously. We clapped loudly. We clapped long. We added a few hoots and whistles. Truth be told, there may have been a bit of a tear in the eye.

Our outsized response was directed at our son Micah, who was one of the featured players. He delivered his lines flawlessly; his timing was masterful; his stage presence was mature beyond his 14 years.

Of course, that's probably what every parent thought about their child's performance that evening. But our case is a bit different because Micah is deaf.

"Profoundly deaf" is the official diagnosis, but that's just a clinical way of saying that he is really, totally deaf. The miracle of Micah, however, is that he operates completely in the world bounded by sound. He hears, he speaks, he listens to music, he enjoys television and movies. Micah's miracle has been made possible through technology. Two cochlear implants connect him to the surrounding soundscape.

He received the first implant at UNC Hospital when he was 4 years old and the second one when he was 8. Cochlear implants are essentially tiny computers surgically implanted in the inner ear to provide sound impulses to the auditory nerve. They are bionic ears. They provide an incredible potential benefit to deaf children. However, for that potential to be realized, a lot of hard work has to be applied by the child and his caregivers. In Micah's case, that hard work came in the form of countless hours that he and my wife spent in speech therapy at the Carolyn

J. Brown Center for Acquisition of Spoken language Through Listening Enrichment (CASTLE) in Durham.

CASTLE is an expansion of the Paul W. Biggers, MD Carolina Children's Communicative Disorders Program (CCCDP). Both CASTLE and CCCDP are part of UNC Medical School and they are to Micah what Anne Sullivan was to Helen Keller. They are a dedicated group of health care professionals who teach children and their parents how to use the powerful tools that medical science has provided so that Micah and those like him have options other than a lifetime of silence.

It is hard to describe the depth of helplessness a parent feels when faced with the unexpected news that his child is deaf. The first despondent thought I had was that I would never be able to read to Micah. I would not be able to introduce him to Tolkien and Lewis and Wodehouse and Dr. Seuss. And what about music? How would I ever explain to him the majesty of Bach or the lyrical poetry of a Paul McCartney tune?

The folks at UNC were always encouraging but, frankly, I was not very optimistic at first. It seemed like an awfully big rock to push up a very steep mountain. Progress was slow. Micah picked up words gradually and with great effort. His younger brother soon eclipsed him on the vocabulary front.

Shell embraced the challenge full on with confidence and strength. For me, though, optimism in the face of the scope of the challenge was hard. Until, that is, one day in Church a few months after Micah's first implant surgery when I heard him singing along with the rest of the congregation. I had never heard him sing before that moment. And as clumsy and awkward as his singing was, to me it was the most beautiful, welcome sound that I had ever heard. It was the sound of success and victory. I knew in that instant that the folks at UNC were right: this was going to work and all the time and effort was worth it.

All of that history – the combined efforts of Micah, Shell, and the rest of our family, coupled with the dedication of the audiologists, surgeons, speech language pathologists, and other folks at CCCDP and CASTLE – comes back in a flash every time Micah beats the odds and succeeds at something in the audible world: when he caught up to, and then exceeded, his peer group for vocabulary and comprehension; when he entered a conventional school on grade level; when his grades steadily increased from Bs and Cs to As and Bs; when he performed well at

his piano recital; when he successfully lobbied the North Carolina legislature for funding for CASTLE; when he volunteered at CASTLE to read to the deaf children attending the pre-school program; when he read the Epistle lesson publicly in Church; and when he delivered his lines at that drama showcase.

At each of these unlikely occurrences, the reality of the miracle comes palpably to mind. And we clap vigorously.