

Hearing MAGAZINE Loss

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[A Love Story]

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[A Love Story]

By Tina and Tom Hamblin



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Tina Fifer Hamblin (34) was born 10 weeks premature weighing just two pounds, 14 ounces. After more than three months in the neonatal intensive care unit, she came home on the fourth of July 1977, weighing less than five pounds. At 23 months, her parents realized that her hearing loss was the result of her early birth.

Tom Hamblin (37) was born with a bilateral, severe-to-profound hearing loss. It wasn't until he was three years old that his mother noticed something was wrong with his hearing.

They each have different experiences with early-onset hearing loss, yet share common ground about what it means to have a hearing loss. Tina now is a bilateral cochlear implant user. Tom wears hearing aids. Read about newlyweds Tom and Tina Hamblin, how they met and why “taking the plunge” has a few meanings for them. After dating for eight years, they were married October 8, 2011, at Kurtz Beach, Maryland.

Tina's Story

My parents didn't know anything was wrong with my hearing until I was 23 months old. Ann, a family friend, was babysitting me and learned that I was not responding to any noise, music or speech. My parents didn't believe her until my grandmother realized that Ann was right. My parents took me to see Dr. Brad Friedrich at Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore. He diagnosed me with sensorineural hearing loss. I was fitted with my first behind-the-ear hearing aids shortly after the diagnosis. My mother dropped out of college to teach me to listen and learn how to communicate.

I was mainstreamed through public school from preschool to my senior year in high school in Bel Air, Maryland. Throughout elementary school, I never was in any special education classes, but did have speech therapy one morning a week with a therapist to help me with my studies. Speech therapy continued through middle school. I did have special education for my reading and writing classes since I was behind due to my hearing loss. I graduated in 1995, but the counselors in high school told my parents that due to my severe hearing loss, I would

not make it through my first year of community college. I took their opinion as my motivation to get through college!

Meeting Fran Had Unexpected Benefits

I attended a community college for five years and changed my major more than four times. Community college was a challenge. One teacher did not understand my hearing loss and I failed a class or two due to lack of communication access. After a long struggle, I was able to graduate in 2000 with an associate's degree in photography. I then transferred to Towson University near Baltimore which opened up new challenges for me. The classes were two or three times bigger than at the community college. I asked for a professional note taker to help me understand the material.

“Tom understood my hearing loss and I understood his. He was so different from the guys I dated since they were all hearing. The guys with normal hearing had no idea what I was going through. I felt that Tom and I were a match made in heaven! We both went through similar struggles and have accomplished many things despite our hearing loss. Until Tom, I had never met anyone who supported me for who I am—hearing loss and all.”

In fall 2003, I had an awesome CART (Communication Access Real-Time Translation) reporter named Fran. She wrote notes that literally were like a script of the entire class. From that point on, I was finally able to understand what was being taught in the class. I graduated from Towson University in December 2003 and am currently working on my master's degree in publication design at the University of Baltimore.

During the time at Towson University, my CART reporter, Fran, told me about Tom Hamblin. She said that Tom was so much like me and that I should meet him. Unfortunately at the time, I had a boyfriend. But, later, Tom and

I communicated by e-mail and got to know each other.

Tom and I developed a close friendship from 2003 through 2006. In late December 2005, Tom asked me to attend the annual Polar Bear Plunge at Sandy Point Park in Annapolis in January 2006. A polar bear plunge is an event held during the winter where participants enter a body of water despite the low temperature. In the United States polar bear plunges are usually held to raise money for charitable organizations. This particular plunge was for the Special Olympics.

I accepted because I wanted to watch Tom plunge in the freezing water. However, he told me that no spectators were allowed—which I later found out wasn't true! Basically he was telling me that I had to also take the plunge in the freezing water. So, I called his bluff and went with him, took the plunge, and raised some money for the Special Olympics. Tom and I went out on a date that night and we have been together ever since!

Tom understood my hearing loss and I understood his. He was so different from the guys I dated since they were all hearing. The guys with normal hearing had no idea what I was going through. I felt that Tom and I were a match made in heaven! We both went through similar struggles and have accomplished many things despite our hearing loss. Until Tom, I had never met anyone who supported me for who I am—hearing loss and all. He also accepted my Norwegian Buhund hearing dogs, Echo and Kaitu.

A New Chapter in My Hearing Loss Story

In November 2008, while at my graphic design job, I was on a photo shoot and my hearing aid died. I thought it just needed a new battery. I went back to my office and replaced the battery but I still couldn't hear, so I assumed that the hearing aid broke. I had it sent in for repairs three times! In February 2009, after the third repair, I put the hearing aid in my right ear and turned it on. I heard only silence.

At that point, I knew I needed to get a new hearing test. Less than a week later, I went to my audiologist in my hometown with my mother. Sitting in the booth, ready to press the buzzer, I heard

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Our "just friends" phase



The Polar Bear Plunge



Wedding day—the second plunge!

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a few sounds and the rest of the time was just dead silence. I knew my hearing had gotten worse. The booth door opened up and the look on the audiologist's and my mother's faces told me everything I needed to know. I went from a 70 dB loss to 100 dB loss. That was largest drop for my good ear that I had ever had. Now both ears had a 100 dB loss.

I immediately saw an ear-nose-throat doctor to see if I had an infection in my ear. He wanted to do steroid shots in my eardrum, which can cause permanent hearing loss in the ear, but he also mentioned that I was a candidate for a cochlear implant (CI). At the time, I was against the implant because I neither wanted a device inserted underneath my skin nor surgery. I left the audiologist's office with a reprogrammed hearing aid to cover the dB loss, but sound was NOT the same anymore. There was so much distortion, static and rustling. I knew that I was going to have to get a cochlear implant to get my hearing back.

Over the next two weeks, I made my decision to get a cochlear implant for my right ear based on the information I got from audiologists and people who have cochlear implants. I went to the nearby Johns Hopkins Hospital and had the implant surgery scheduled for August.

A Surprise Before the Surgery

Two days before my implant surgery, I planned to have dinner with Tom and two friends in Baltimore. Just before we left for dinner, Tom told me that he made me a scrapbook, which I thought was kind of odd especially since we were going to meet our friends. To my surprise, he presented it at dinner and it was my marriage proposal scrapbook! It was filled with photos of us as friends and later as a couple. I happily said yes.

I had surgery two days after the proposal. That day was the scariest day of my life. I was told that there is less than a one percent failure rate. I thought what if that one percent is me? I cried going to the operating room. When I entered the operating room, everyone shouted "Hi!"

I was thinking...why are they so chipper and friendly? They sat me on the table and got me really warm blankets—fresh out of the dryer. The mask went on

and I was off to sleep. I woke up in recovery in intense pain. I started thinking I made a mistake—was it over? After getting that pain down to a bearable level, I was able to go home, but I was still miserable. During the entire time of recovery, I kept saying to myself, "I hope it's worth the pain." The pain lasted two weeks.

Activation Day

A month later, on the Friday before Labor Day weekend, I was to be activated. My parents and Tom came with me. Everyone told me not to have my expectations too high. I still had thoughts that the CI would not work. The audiologist turned the CI on, but I didn't hear anything. However, I did feel the sounds in my forehead and felt a migraine coming on. My audiologist said "That's it!" I looked at him like he was crazy. I went home not hearing anything, just feeling the sounds. I spent the holiday at the beach trying my best to hear. I was able to use the hearing aid on my opposite ear to help a little, since I was getting drained from the newly-implanted ear.

After that weekend, I went back to my audiologist with Tom to get my first mapping where they tune the processor. After my audiologist turned on the CI and spoke to me, I was finally able to hear! I left with a huge smile on my face. Then I heard something new. I looked over my raincoat and matched that sound from the raindrops hitting on my jacket. It was the first time I had ever heard rain. Tom was able to witness me experience these new sounds. I never realized that certain actions make sounds.

Since then, I got a CI in the other ear. My husband has been so supportive of me being bilateral, being a mentor, volunteering and running support groups. I enjoy giving back to the community in so many ways. I not only help people who are thinking of getting CIs, I also volunteer my free time with my retired hearing dog, Echo, who now is a therapy dog. Echo and I visit several hospitals, including Johns Hopkins, Kennedy Krieger and Port Discovery once a month. The patients forget about being sick when Echo is with them.

I am so happy I married my soul mate and best friend. We are so excited for our future together and know that as a couple, we can accomplish anything we set our minds to!

Tom's Story

My mother noticed there was something wrong with me when I was three years old. After numerous visits to various doctors and not getting an explanation from any of them, she took me to the National Child Research Center in Washington, D.C. I was finally diagnosed with a bilateral, severe-to-profound hearing loss. I wore my first behind-the-ear hearing aid at the age of four.

During my early childhood, Cued Speech was a part of my communication that helped me build my language skills. I was oral, did not use sign language, and spent more than 13 years of my life going to speech therapy. I grew up around hearing people, but had a rough life because I was tormented and teased a lot because of my hearing aids and bulky FM system.

“ I was told many times that I would not be successful in the world because I couldn't hear. I wanted to be a normal kid and not be singled out from others. ”

I went to regular classes from pre-school to 7th grade. When I started 8th grade, I was put in a special education class full of deaf kids, which made me feel very uncomfortable because I didn't know American Sign Language. The kids in the class hated me because I could speak well and was more like a hearing child than a deaf child.

I didn't have many friends in school and didn't socialize much because I would always get transferred because the schools didn't know how to help a child with a

What is Cued Speech?

Cued Speech is a system of communication used with and among people with hearing loss. It is a phonemic-based system which makes traditionally spoken languages accessible by using a small number of hand shapes (representing consonants) in different locations near the mouth (representing vowels), as a supplement to lip-reading. It is now used by people with a variety of language, speech, communication and learning needs.

To learn more about Cued Speech go to the National Cued Speech Association at www.cuedspeech.org.

hearing loss. I attended 10 different schools from private to public. In spring 1993, I graduated from Arundel Senior High School in Gambrills, Maryland. That fall, I attended the University of Maryland to study kinesiology.

Trying to Fit in with a Hearing Loss

I was also told many times that I would not be successful in the world because I couldn't hear. I wanted to be a normal kid and not be singled out from others. Most of my life, I didn't accept myself for who I was and my self-esteem went into a downward spiral. During that time, I needed to find out who I really was. Participating in sports was the answer to my question about what I could do and who I was.

Diving was my first love, followed by acrobatics, trampoline and tumbling. Being in sports really helped me adjust to the mainstream world of people who could hear. After a few years, I found myself winning multiple national titles in diving, acrobatics, high school gymnastics, trampoline and power tumbling. I decided to stay in the sports world and follow in my coach's footsteps to help others to

help themselves. I started my coaching career at the age of 15. Ten years later, I became a national and international coach. During the summers, I worked at Woodward Gymnastics Camp, where I coached kids of all ages and different levels, including kids from countries such as Canada, Sweden, and Denmark.

College Life

Attending the University of Maryland was a journey of ups and downs, but I was finally able to graduate after seven years. It was not easy due to the lack of services of the Disability Student Services (DSS). They didn't provide many resources to help me get through school. I was academically dismissed from the university due to professors failing me and not being able to get proper information from student note takers. After going through 15 note takers in one year, the university suggested that I take non-credit classes on how to take notes and advised me to get tested for a learning disability. I refused to take the offer and did my own research.

I asked DSS about getting a professional note taker or some type of a

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Surprise! Two days before Tina's cochlear implant surgery, Tom proposed to her in front of her friends.

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court reporter. The DSS told me that there was no such service available. After calling other major colleges, I found out about CART from Towson University and Penn State University. I asked the University of Maryland's DSS office about CART and if they had such services. Having CART was a lifesaver and was the best thing that helped me with my education. My grades went up dramatically.

Fran Shows Up Again

In the fall of 2003, Fran was my first professional note taker. Fran was a true professional CART person. She understood my struggles and feelings that I had during earlier semesters. Fran was telling me about a beautiful young girl named Tina Fifer who had the same struggles at Towson University that I did. She thought we would be great together. After an online introduction, Tina and I started communicating via e-mail.

After a few e-mails, we went out to lunch. At the time, I didn't really think it was a good idea to date and have distraction after fighting battles with the school. I wanted to focus on my education and my coaching career. Truth be told, I didn't date much at the time since I was afraid to get hurt because no one understood my hearing loss and what I faced. I would always wind up getting hurt. I lost my trust in others and focused on myself in my own world.

Tina and I continued to communicate via e-mail and got to know each other a little more. She had the same struggles I went through with my childhood and with schooling. She understood my goals—trying to get through school and to focus on my coaching career. She was also stuck in both worlds like I was, meaning neither being deaf or someone with a hearing loss but somewhere in between.

A few months later, in December 2003, she offered to help me videotape my tumbling for my biomechanics project on the effect of flipping motion. She was quite impressed with my tumbling and had never seen gymnastics action so close. She also helped me with my school project using PowerPoint and made my presentation look more

professional. She told me she was a graphic artist and that this was right up her alley. We remained friends for several years.

Taking the Plunge (Twice!)

In January 2006, I asked Tina to attend the Polar Bear Plunge. I had been participating in it for several years for the Special Olympics of Maryland. Tina wanted to watch me plunge in the bay, but I told her that no spectators were allowed, that she had to raise money and had to plunge with me. Well, she did it! After the plunge, our friendship grew and we started dating. We understood each other's experiences and supported each other in everything we did. I realized that we were a strong pair together.

I graduated from the University of Maryland in December 2007. I was happy to be finished with school and concentrate on my career and my life. I have always been supportive of Tina in whatever she was doing. She loves art, crafts, graphic design, scrapbooking, and many other creative things. She has a lot of talent and is a true professional. In her spare time, she made CD covers for my acrobatics team, designed t-shirts for the Maryland State Acrobatic Championships, designed hoodies for my high school team that I was coaching, and also made logos for my trampoline and tumbling teams. Tina has helped me in so many ways!

In 2008, she was struggling with her hearing loss and decided to get a cochlear implant. I proposed to Tina in front of our two friends two days before her CI surgery and of course she said yes! Even though it was so close to her surgery day, I felt it was the right time to make her part of my life forever.

We were supposed to get married a year ago in October 2010, but she wanted to hear her vows with both ears and wanted her ears all trained before we tied the knot, so we took the plunge last October 2011. She still remains supportive of my coaching, my education and my dreams. 🎉

Tom and Tina live in Glen Burnie, MD. They can be reached via e-mail at Hamblin Family@gmail.com. Tina blogs at www.yougottabelievehonornot.blogspot.com. Tom blogs at tumbletech11.blogspot.com.

Orioles game, April 2006



Our wedding party



Drum roll, please!



Our fur children, Echo & Kaitu