

The Telegram

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Listen up: Cochlear implants have opened up a whole new world of sounds to hearing-impaired children like Leanna Rowe

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Leanna Rowe is a bright, bubbly, 12-year-old who lives in St. John's. Her loves include her mom, Michelle, her dad, Terry, her younger sister, Lindsay -- and Angel, the family dog. She loves jazz and ballet, singing and playing the piano. She also likes basketball, tennis and swimming, and she's an avid reader.

Leanna attends Brother Rice junior high where she's in Grade 7 in French immersion. She's an A student, says her proud mom.

For high school, Leanna hopes to go to Prince of Wales Collegiate because that's where her parents went and she's heard the school offers "a lot of nice programs."

Her plans for the future, for when she's all grown up, are hazy. She knows she wants to go to Memorial University and get a degree, but what she will do after that she hasn't yet decided.

"Some kids' choices are limited because they have a handicap. I'm really lucky because I can choose what I want to do and do it," says Leanna, whose confidence in herself appears boundless.

SURPRISING DISCOVERY

Leanna was born at St. Clare's Hospital in St. John's on Sept. 6, 1991. She was a healthy, full-term baby and her parents were delighted with their little blond charmer.

In her first year of life, there was nothing to suggest Leanna was any different from other children her age. She took her first steps, she tried to talk.

"She babbled ... she was very vocal," says her mom. "When I said, 'Show Mommy your nose,' or 'Clap your hands,' she would do it."

But one day, just after her first birthday, a visiting relative walked into the kitchen, saw the back of Leanna's head as she sat in her high chair and, without moving to stand in front of her, called out her name. Leanna did not respond.

That incident led the Rowses to bring their baby for testing and, much to their surprise, they were told Leanna was profoundly deaf.

"I was shocked," says Michelle, who is very accustomed to deaf children -- she's worked as a dormitory counsellor at the School for the Deaf on Topsail Road for the past 15 years.

Following her diagnosis, Leanna was immediately fitted with two hearing aids, and her parents chose to teach her language by having her listen to sounds, everything from an ambulance siren to a toilet flushing. As well, they constantly played with her and talked to her.

"This was a chatterbox house," says Leanna, laughing. She learned how to speak as well as how to lip read as a result of her parents' attentiveness.

When Leanna was six, her mom's colleagues at the School for the Deaf told her about cochlear implants. The Rowses decided that was the route they wanted to take for their child.

A cochlear implant is an electronic device designed to help severe to profoundly deaf individuals who gain little or no benefit from hearing aids.

With cochlear implants, the individual can perceive environmental sounds, and most can understand speech without lip reading. Some can use the telephone.

The implant consists of two main components: an internal component which is implanted surgically, and an external component which is worn outside the body.

Cochlear implants are currently done in this province by Dr. Tony Batten in St. John's, but when Leanna had the procedure done the Rowes had to go away.

They went to Ottawa where, following an assessment at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, Leanna was declared a perfect candidate for a cochlear implant and soon afterwards the surgery was carried out. She now wears a fairly inconspicuous behind-the-ear (BTE) device which connects to a magnet implanted inside her mastoid bone.

Without her BTE, Leanna's world is totally silent. With it, she's part of a universe that's filled with sounds. Leanna sees Nora Cahill, an auditory verbal therapist, once a week, and Paul Peddle, her itinerant teacher, meets with her after school twice a week to see if she has any problems. She calls Peddle her mentor. She is very happy her parents chose to let her have a cochlear implant.

"I think people should get everything they can to make things better for them," she says. "I'm glad Mom and Dad did that for me."

Everyone, says Leanna, has the capability to do more than they are doing.

HEARING MONTH

May is Better Hearing and Speech Month around the world, and many self-help and support groups like the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association--Newfoundland and Labrador (CHHA-NL) use the month to promote greater awareness of hearing loss issues.

Hearing loss affects between 10-15 per cent of the overall population across North America. The fastest growing segment for hearing loss is people between the ages of 18 to 45, something thought to be primarily due to our increasingly noisy world, especially noises generated by everything from headsets to ATVs. The CHHA-NL offers a wide range of programs and services on behalf of the approximately 50,000 hard-of-hearing consumers who live in Newfoundland and Labrador, including speech reading courses, advocacy and outreach programs, resource library and technical devices loans.

To contact the CHHA-NL call 753-3224.

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Note(s):

Ran with fact box "Hearing month" which has been appended to the story.

Figure:

Color Photo: Leanna Rowe of St. John's poses with the Rowes' family dog, Angel.

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