

# A Cochlear Implant at Age 31 Started a Career in Public Service



Tonia in her role as police officer

**Tonia McDonald, a Job Readiness Training Coordinator with the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department, attributes her personal success story to receiving cochlear implants as a young adult. Medicaid covered her surgery and device, allowing her to find a meaningful way to contribute to others' advancement and personally benefit from having a rewarding career.**

**ACIA: Tell us about your life after cochlear implant (CI) surgery.**

**TM:** I can hardly remember how I functioned when I was deaf—before I received cochlear implants. Life has been amazing since then! I can hear things I never heard before. I can hear my children and understand their words. I can talk on the telephone, which is huge for me. I listen to music. I can hear birds. I feel like I can do anything now. Sometimes I worry what would happen if I didn't have access to my cochlear implants. What would I do without them? I can't imagine going back.

**ACIA: What caused your hearing loss?**

**TM:** When I was 10 years old, I was hit in the head with a baseball. I was knocked unconscious and taken to the hospital. I had horrible vertigo and everything sounded like “transformers.” When I woke up the next morning, I couldn't hear in either ear. The doctors discovered that I had enlarged vestibular aqueducts and that, combined with the head injury, caused me to lose my hearing. I used hearing aids and learned sign language.

**ACIA: You didn't receive your cochlear implants until you were an adult. Why did you wait?**

**TM:** When I was 12, my mother considered cochlear implants for me but she was worried about the surgery. In 2009, I visited my audiologist to get new hearing aids. She mentioned that I was a candidate for cochlear implants.

*continued*



Tonia is now a Job Readiness Training Officer.



**ACIA: What were your educational and career opportunities like before?**

**TM:** In high school I was in a mainstream classroom and had a sign language interpreter. I started college but couldn't find my "fit." It didn't work for me, even with an interpreter. I changed my major multiple times and worked with the school counseling office to find a career path I was interested in and not hampered by my hearing loss. I wanted to pursue business but it would have been hard for me to be a business manager given the communication challenges. I ended up leaving school. I had various jobs—none of them lasted very long.

**ACIA: Why did you decide to pursue cochlear implantation?**

**TM:** At age 30, I realized that if I wanted to succeed in school and have a chance for a fulfilling career, I needed to be able to hear better. I was fortunate (and grateful) that South Carolina Medicaid covered the surgery and the device.

**ACIA: If Medicaid hadn't provided coverage for your cochlear implants, do you think you would have had the same career opportunities?**

**TM:** No, not at all. When I decided to pursue cochlear implantation, I began applying for jobs. I was excited about the opportunities that I might have with more hearing. I felt more confident. I applied to the police department and passed all of the requirements. I would not have been accepted on the force without my cochlear implants. I was on the force for about a year. During that time I went back to school and earned my bachelor's degree, majoring in social work with a minor in psychology. I wanted to be involved in public service in a different way. I'm now working full-time as a Job Readiness Training Coordinator for the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department. I never could have done this were it not for the hearing provided by cochlear implants.

**ACIA: When you worked for the police department, what did your fellow officers think of your cochlear implants? What about in your current position at the Vocational Rehabilitation Department?**

**TM:** My cochlear implants have never been an issue with my fellow co-workers; they allow me to be successful at my job. As a police officer, I needed to be able to hear and communicate on the radio and I needed to be able to hear people come up behind me. It was a matter of safety. My CIs allowed me to successfully perform all of the functions that a police officer needs to do.

In my current position my experience with hearing loss is an advantage. I have several deaf clients who use sign. The hearing provided by my CIs allows me to communicate fully with clients and with my coworkers.

**ACIA: What plans do you have for the future?**

**TM:** I'm going back to school to begin a master's degree to advance my counseling background and continue to help others.

**ACIA: What thoughts would you like to share with others considering cochlear implantation as an option?**

**TM:** Go for it! Cochlear implants are worth it. But you have to give the process an honest effort. It takes work to learn to listen with CIs but being able to hear others clearly at work and in your personal life is amazing. The fact that Medicaid covered my surgery was truly a game-changer for me in every way.



© 2017 American Cochlear Implant Alliance

