

Finally, I've got

MY LIFE BACK

Anna Lyford, 45, was profoundly deaf but a chance encounter with someone who had a cochlear implant changed her life forever...

Steadying myself at the kitchen sink, I had to check I wasn't imagining it. 'Are you ready to go to school then, Mum?' Yes, that was it – the ordinary, but unmistakable, sentence I heard my 10-year-old son Andrew say two weeks after I'd had my cochlear implant activated.

I'd had my back to him, so I hadn't lip-read as usual. It was the first properly recognisable human speech I'd heard for years. He repeated the question, with a touch of irritation this time.

Tears welled up inside me. I knew this was the breakthrough I'd been hoping for.

I felt crushed

Just over 20 years before, I had started to lose my hearing. I was only 16 and, already an awkward teenager, it was just too much. I had the same congenital hearing condition my mother and grandmother have. NHS hearing aids were large and ugly in those days and I felt self-conscious. I was clever at school but struggled, and later at university I felt unable to cope and dropped out.

My parents paid privately for a smaller, more discreet hearing

aid and I went to work on a management-training scheme. Things were looking up. I married at the age of 23 and three years later had my daughter Christie. But after the birth my hearing dipped. I was back to feeling alienated and kept making mistakes at work because I couldn't hear properly. I felt completely crushed and left.

When Andrew was born two years later my hearing became even worse. Now I couldn't use the telephone at all. You have no idea what it feels like to not be able to make an appointment, to speak to the school, to have a chat with a close friend

or your own mum. I felt as if I was on the sidelines of life – observing it but not really being able to join in.

One day, my mum Chris suggested we go to an exhibition for the deaf. There, I met

Debbie Hallman (now a good friend and mentor), who asked me if I could do some voluntary work with hearing aids. Quite soon after, a paid job came up and I started work as a communication

rehabilitation officer.

But my hearing was deteriorating once more and I started to struggle again. My friend Michelle took me to a George Michael concert. I know all his songs, but she had to tell me

'I couldn't hear George Michael'

Since her implant, Anna feels more independent



Loud and clear in Thailand

The WaterWear cover means Anna can even snorkel



Anna now helps other people with hearing difficulties

which ones he was singing. It knocked the stuffing out of me. Then it hit me. I was only 36 and profoundly deaf.

Feeling upbeat

Through a sheer stroke of luck, I met someone through work who had a cochlear implant. I was amazed.

'You should have one,' she said.

I turned up for my assessment at the Southampton University Auditory Implant Service and was so scared, I burst into tears. So much was riding on it, but the team was so supportive. 'What have I got to lose?' I thought.

I had my operation in mid-December 2007, aged 37. In the January I had my device activated. The team had prepared me well and I took everything in baby steps. After I heard my son speak, it took a few months to get used to human speech. Then I gradually began to listen to music. I went to see George Michael again for my birthday with my friend Shaun. I could hear him! We both cried tears of joy.

Then this year, I had another surprise. I've always loved swimming but have had to do it in silence. Seagulls squawking,

water splashing, my children laughing – all this has been lost to me. In March I got a special WaterWear cover for my implant and tried it out in Thailand. I can now dive, swim, snorkel and even enjoy spa days.

In fact, I'm feeling so upbeat I'm going with my mum to India in October for her 70th birthday. And you remember the story about the man who liked a product

so much he bought the company? Well, I now work at the Auditory Implant Service, doing for other people what they did for me. I've been here nearly four years and I love it.

I've really turned my life around since my operation. My implant has given me back so much – my independence, my self-confidence and a full social life.

How does the implant work?

The Med-El cochlear implant consists of two parts. One part is surgically fitted under the skin, slightly above the ear, with electrodes that go to the cochlea – part of the inner ear that turns sound waves into nerve impulses.

The other part looks like a conventional hearing aid and contains a microphone. The microphone sends sounds to the speech processor that's like a mini computer. A stimulator converts the information into an electrical signal. This in turn



stimulates the hearing nerve. The nerve sends the signals to the brain that it interprets as sound.

Cochlear implants work for those who have sensorineural hearing loss, for whom conventional hearing aids are ineffective.

Cochlear implants began in the 1990s and Southampton University Auditory Implant Service celebrates its 1,000th implant this year.

FIND OUT MORE

- ◆ WaterWear cover: medel.co.uk
- ◆ National Cochlear Implant Users Association: nciua.uk