

T H E BOOSTER

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COMMENTARY

Technology helps Dad deal with hearing loss

Two years ago, hearing a blind church member sing a solo nearly ripped my heart in half. Not because I felt sorry for the man, but because I was jealous of him.

When he finished, the entire sanctuary – clapping and congratulating him on his performance – made him feel embraced.

My father missed out on such an embrace. Dad heard none of the dulcimer music and little of the rest of the service at my wedding in April 1995. Like that boy in the bubble, he was very alone in there.

As a psychiatrist, the music of our voices had always communicated something extra to Dad. "When you visited here, I could hear you and your mother from the other room," he told me over the phone one night.

"From the sweetness of your voices, I could tell the kind of conversation the two of you were having. It made me feel very good."

That ended by his middle 70s. Faxes replaced our phone chats. Mom quit trying to comment on nice sunsets. By the time she'd repeatedly shouted her remark slowly and distinctly, word by exasperating word, the sunset didn't seem very nice anymore.

This struggle to adjust to a new reality is hard on an entire family. The whole experience creates a psychological jungle.

Being unable to hear had no impact on the activities in which Dad involved himself.

At 50, when just slightly hard-of-hearing, Dad began karate lessons. By 60, he skied and occasionally rode a motorcycle.

He began wearing hearing aids around 65 but had no plans of slowing down because of old age. His main objection, at 78, to having a cochlear implant – a surgically inserted doodad which would restore some of his hearing – was that "those doctors" wouldn't want him to ski or practice tai chi anymore.

The kind of deafness Dad experienced is caused when nerve hairs in the cochlea fall out. The surgeon threads a

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tiny wire into the spiral chamber in the inner ear lined by the remaining nerve hairs. This wire – with help from an external device – "boosts" the "signal" to the brain.

With so few nerve hairs and the limitation of manmade materials, a pleasing spectrum of pitch is not currently available to those who use the device. But the person can hear and, with common sense safety precautions, can still be very athletic.

Indeed, this past year at 80 Dad began tennis lessons.

By the time he and I discussed surgery, you had to write down anything you wanted Dad to "hear."

Watching the blind church member wrenched my heart and set me into action. I began contacting surgeons in Columbus.

Dad had surgery in May 1997. By July, as I, with weak knees, drove him home from finally having the hearing device turned on, he heard the quiet "boinka-boinka" of the car's blinker. It was truly a miracle.

Our expectations couldn't have been higher.

Cochlear implant technology is vehemently rejected by some members of the deaf community who have created satisfying lives for themselves using American Sign Language and having friends who live in the silent space where my father was.

The cochlear implant, though an imperfect solution, was the right one for my dad. Unfortunately, it makes everyone's voice sound like Mickey Mouse's. Dad – who always knew the words to every musical – cannot tell you what song is playing in the background at a restaurant.

In fact, sometimes he isn't sure if the phone rang or if he dropped his keys. But as time passes, his understanding of his still-new hearing improves.

Life is better. We can now talk on the telephone. Dad has always said he plans to live to be 108. Who knows what kind of technology will be available by the time he takes up rodeo riding or bungee jumping?

Cynthia Rush is a freelance writer living in Clintonville. Her father, Dr. Martin Rush, still practices psychiatry in Middletown. He is the author of Decoding the Secret Language of Your Body, published by Simon and Schuster in 1995.