

Listening and Spoken Language Knowledge Center

For children and adults with hearing loss, their families and the professionals who support them

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FOR THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING

Grandparents and the Circle of Love

By Amy McConkey-Robbins, M.S., CCC-SLP

Part of the privilege of working with children who are deaf or hard of hearing is that we share in some of their highest and lowest moments – we are given the gift of being present at intimate moments in the lives of the families we serve. Each child and family with whom I've worked these past 30 years has been special but, as most clinicians would say, a few families and children hold an abiding place in one's heart. Such is the case of Oliver.



The perfect storm of events that came together for this family compelled Oliver's maternal grandparents, life-long residents of Honduras, to care for him for the first four and a half years of his life, then to relinquish his care, joyfully but with a sense of loss, to his parents in the United States. As with many things in life, Oliver's world has come full circle – he maintains contact with his grandparents through visits, phone calls and email, grandparents who protected and loved him in his early years.

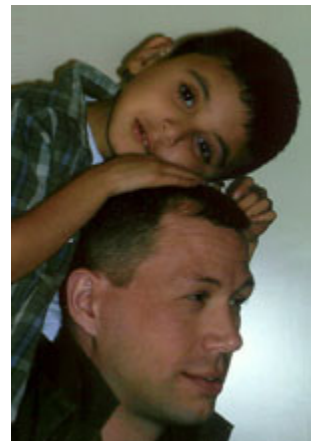
Oliver's story began with his birth in Honduras to a Honduran mother and an American father – loving parents who welcomed their first and only child. Urgent passport and visa restrictions required that the parents return to the United States shortly after Oliver was born in order to get their documents in place to return to Honduras to bring Oliver home to the United States. They could not have predicted what would occur in the ensuing days.

Shortly after the parents left their newborn temporarily in the care of his grandparents in Choluteca, Honduras, the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001. Immediately, a new policy of restriction on immigration and an interminable wait-listing was instituted for national security. Although Oliver's parents made repeated appeals to various agencies, they were unsuccessful in getting permission to bring him to the United States. He was placed on a list of thousands of other non-residents whose relatives were desperate to bring them into America. As time passed, Oliver's grandparents and his three maternal aunts accepted that he might be with them in Honduras for much longer than originally planned. To quote the ancient poet, Rumi, they "stepped out of the circle of time and into the circle of love." That is, although they realized they had little control over how long Oliver would live with them, they had complete control over how they loved and cared for him. They

provided a nurturing, secure and happy home for the precious and bright toddler, who seemed to be developing typically in every way except in speech. They expressed their concerns in frequent phone calls to his parents, who made multiple trips back to Honduras in unsuccessful attempts to secure Oliver's papers and bring him to the United States.

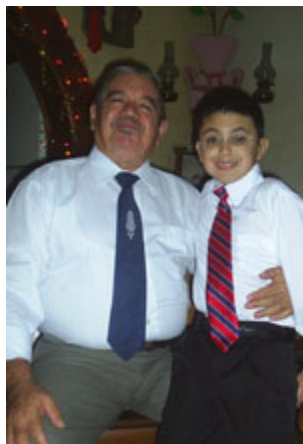
After a particularly worrisome report from her parents, Oliver's mother asked them to take him for a hearing evaluation. The news was devastating to the family: he was diagnosed with a profound, bilateral hearing loss. When Oliver's mother called and spoke to the ear, nose and throat specialist in Honduras, his response was, "Don't waste your money buying hearing aids. This child is so deaf that only cochlear implants will help him." However, cochlear implants were not available in Honduras. Thus his parents became even more frantic to find a way to legally bring Oliver into the United States, understanding that Oliver was losing ground in his communication. In spite of the futility of their efforts, one thing remained constant: Oliver's grandparents continued to love him, nurture him and provide for him in every way they knew, even though he was unable to hear or understand anything they said to him in their native Spanish. Yet, they never gave up hope that he would one day be united with his parents and receive the cochlear implants. The foundation of love and security they gave him, though it was non-linguistic, created a boy who was happy and confident, though unable to communicate with symbolic language. He learned to love the food and customs of the only culture he had ever known, that of Honduras, and he was deeply bonded to his grandparents and aunts. He loved his visits from mommy and daddy, but we can only imagine that, without any language, he was unsure of who these visitors were.

After dozens of unsuccessful attempts, his parents finally made an appeal to Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana who intervened at the highest level in the U.S. State Department. The news came: Oliver would receive his papers and was cleared to enter the United States. His arrival was a combination of great joy and sobering reality. Here was a 4 1/2 year old in a new country with new foods and customs, separated from his grandparents and aunts, living with people he knew but didn't understand, and facing the obstacle of severe language deprivation. His parents made the decision to attempt a listening and spoken language, diagnostic teaching approach; Oliver had cochlear implant surgery and began an intense therapy and home program with me as well as full time placement at the St. Joseph Institute for the Deaf in Indianapolis, Ind. Due to his age, the parents made a decision in our sessions to augment his spoken language by using some sign support temporarily as a means of rapid communication development; Oliver needed a working vocabulary to express his wants, needs and feelings, and to understand what his parents expressed. Though working an exhausting job as a full-time pediatric medical interpreter, his mother played language games and fostered his communication development at every opportunity, bringing a written weekly summary to each of our sessions. On one she wrote, "When I tried to join him in playing something, Oliver said, 'Mommy, you go away; it's my turn' and we were thrilled at his desire for independence and his ability to express this verbally." His implant was highly successful, and he often made the transfer between the signed and spoken English word after only one or two exposures, typically dropping the sign on his own as his spoken language improved. At school, his program was strictly listening and spoken language, and he began to blossom in his linguistic skills.



With the deep commitment of his parents, supported by love from his grandparents in Honduras, Oliver began to make progress that astounded us all. While I cannot predict that many children with his history would progress as he did, I think it is not an exaggeration to say that Oliver defied the odds. As he progressed, his bonding with his parents became complete and I have a memory of his father, who often brought him to therapy, chuckling as he explained to me that my pretend food therapy toys might not be culturally appropriate. Whereas children raised in the United States would be familiar with pizza, french fries and hamburgers, he said Oliver craved and asked for tamales, tortillas and queso. What a gift this was to me to have a father so invested in his son's progress. (By the way, clinicians can buy large sets of play food that have an ethnic theme, and Oliver's dad prompted me to do so.) Meanwhile, Oliver's spoken language improved by leaps and bounds.

As a decision neared regarding a school placement, Oliver's father tragically died. This left another scar on this young boy's life, and that of his mother. Again, his grandparents were there to comfort and support, and to provide the encouragement that led his mother to move to St. Louis where Oliver is a full-time student at the St. Joseph Institute for the Deaf – St. Louis. He and his mother return to Honduras on a regular basis, and it is "fantastico," as his grandfather says, that he now greets them by saying "Hi, Abuelo, Hello, Abuela. I am happy to be here!" For these loving grandparents who knew him when he could only point, cry or lead them to a desired object, his spoken communication is nothing short of miraculous



When clinicians think of managing children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families, time becomes our master – for good reasons. We count the hours, days and weeks until a child receives his or her hearing aids or cochlear implants, or begins a new therapy program. But when we have no control over time, we must, as these grandparents so bravely demonstrated, step out of the tyranny of time and set a new priority: to ensure that a child is fully wrapped in a blanket of security and love. They say life brings us full circle, and when I think of what these parents and grandparents sacrificed for a little boy who has been through more trauma than many adults have, I sense the presence of a circle of love that surrounded Oliver in Central America, in Indianapolis and now in St. Louis, where he continues to thrive and fulfill his potential.

In loving memory of Brian McKown.

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