

# Safe AND SOUND

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NO ONE KNOWS WHY ANNETTE GILMORE-SCOTT WAS BORN DEAF. BOTH HER PARENTS HEAR WELL, AS DOES HER YOUNGER BROTHER. RATHER THAN ASKING WHY ME, ANNETTE LISTENED TO AN INNER VOICE THAT TOLD HER ANYTHING WAS POSSIBLE. NOW SHE SHARES HOW A COCHLEAR IMPLANT CHANGED HER LIFE FOREVER.

It's true – actions speak louder than words. Before we meet, Annette Gilmore-Scott sends me a text message imploring me to drive safely in the wet weather. She sounds lovely.

Fast forward a few days and we find ourselves in a Noosa cafe, talking all things auditory.

Annette tells me that her mum Coleen grew concerned about her hearing when she was just 18 months of age. In the mornings, Coleen would go to Annette's room and start talking to her but Annette would keep her back turned and it wasn't until Coleen came into full view that she received any acknowledgement from little Annette. "She knew something was wrong," Annette recalls.

Coleen took her daughter to a doctor who arranged a referral for an ear, nose and throat specialist. Within a week, Annette was fitted with hearing aids. "I was born naturally deaf for no reason. We don't know what caused it," Annette says. The family pored through medical histories dating back several generations but all investigations drew a blank. Once again, silence prevailed.

When Annette was three years of age, Coleen began teaching her to speak. She studied the technique of Cued Speech – an aid to lip reading based on phonetics. The approach proved extremely helpful for Annette's pronunciation. It was to be an early preparation for what Coleen intended to be a traditional education. "Mum wanted me to go to school with students who could hear," Annette says. "She explained that we live in a hearing world and I needed to learn how to live a full life in that world."

From the first day Annette put on a school uniform, life became more complicated. She'd become adept at lip reading but her teachers weren't always accommodating.

"Naturally they were used to turning around and writing on the blackboard with their backs to the students," Annette says. "My education was very difficult and I felt embarrassed by my poor grades."

Annette was the only deaf pupil in her primary school and her struggles

were compounded outside of the classroom. "A lot of the children had trouble understanding me because of my speech difficulties. I can still remember one girl calling me deaf and dumb." It's true – kids can be cruel.

As always, Annette turned to her mum for support through the tough times. Today she speaks of her in almost reverential tones. This is a woman who acted as mentor, tutor, motivator and mum all wrapped up in one.

"She is a very positive person. Whenever I felt sad or had negative thoughts, she'd remind me that I could do anything I wanted to do. She gave me enormous encouragement as I was growing up. We've been through a lot together."

In year eight, they made the switch from a large Brisbane school to St Peter Claver College, an Ipswich school that incorporated a Hearing Impaired Unit. Annette learnt Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN) and benefitted from having interpreters and note-takers on hand for additional support in the classroom.

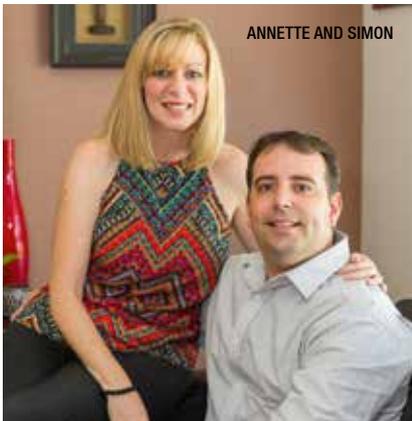
"It was fantastic. Being around hearing impaired kids made me realise I wasn't the only person facing these types of challenges," Annette says. Her confidence grew and she forged firm friendships with her classmates, some of whom remain her friends more than 20 years later.

Her new school ushered in new highs for Annette but they were tempered with recurring lows. "I was a difficult teenager," she admits. "I was a very frustrated person." Annette says group get-togethers, such as family dinners, fuelled her 'cranky' behaviour.

"Everyone was constantly changing topics and I had trouble following conversations. I felt left out. I'd bang things on the table to try and get people's attention. They'd say, 'Sorry Annette but it's nothing important' and I'd say 'No, I want you to tell me what you said, I want to know what you're talking about.'"

Annette's mother stepped in and took on the role of navigating nuances on her behalf. She'd signpost group conversations and tell Annette each time a new topic was introduced. This approach certainly made family dinners easier to swallow.

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was driving her to distraction. “I asked my colleagues about this irritating wind-like sound but they couldn’t pinpoint it.” Eventually the culprit was identified as air-conditioning!

Despite these early frustrations, Annette now credits her cochlear implant with helping to advance her career. Just two years after her ‘switch on’ she won the 2009 Kaye Byrne Encouragement Award for her work in educating colleagues about the most effective ways to communicate with their hearing impaired peers. The following year, she took out the Cochlear HEARO for Queensland Award from Cochlear Limited. She also undertook further studies, completing her Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.

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When I ask Annette to share with me some tips for communicating with people who may be hearing impaired, she says it’s important to speak slowly and clearly, directly face the person, don’t cover your mouth and make sure you have their full attention. According to Annette, asking questions is a good way to make sure your message has been fully understood.

In addition to sharing her workplace insights with employers and employees, Annette also helps people contemplating cochlear implant surgery. She is a regular volunteer with the Cochlear Awareness Network, [www.c-a-network.com](http://www.c-a-network.com) – supporting people who are hearing impaired, in their decision-making process and their post-operative care. She has also been a guest speaker at a string of Queensland universities and medical practices, sharing her story with audiology students and practitioners alike.

It’s unsurprising that Annette has the ability to connect with such a

diverse network of people, given her natural warmth and friendly demeanor. Ironically, her connection to her husband, Sunshine Coast architect Simon Scott, wasn’t what you’d call instantaneous. She admits their first encounter was far from a fairytale.

The pair was set up through mutual friends. “He liked me straight away,” Annette laughs. “His mum told me he was totally smitten! He chased me for five weeks but I wasn’t ready for a relationship.” Eventually Annette bent her own rules and fell deeply and completely in love. She and Simon married in 2011. This is one coupling with more than one coincidence. Like Annette, Simon was born with unexplained deafness. He too has a younger brother as well as very loving and supportive parents.

Annette still sounds like a newlywed when she elaborates on her admiration for the man she says “truly understands” her. She is also full of pride for his work. Simon runs his own architectural firm, SSB Design studio, [www.ssbstudio.com.au](http://www.ssbstudio.com.au) and has been responsible for some award-winning Sunshine Coast homes.

However, Simon’s not the only creative in this couple. Annette is a talented artist. She’s delightfully humble and I really have to cajole her into sharing some of her artwork with me. When she eventually produces her iPhone with a series of photographs of her work, I am spellbound. Her abstract images are captivating. Some are extremely precise and appear to be printed in some way but I’m amazed to discover they were all done by hand. “I just love painting,” Annette says. “I find it very relaxing.”

A fascination with Aboriginal artwork led her to explore the technique. She shows me an eye-catching painting that makes it look as though she’s practiced the technique for years.

Between her husband’s architectural acumen and her ease at the easel, Simon and Annette are a doubly talented duo. As we say our farewells, Annette confides her next big challenge is convincing Simon to get a cochlear implant too. Although he’s just about confirmed his decision, he’s yet to book a date for the surgery. One thing’s for certain, in Annette’s care he’s sure to be safe and sound. ○



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Meanwhile, back in the schoolyard there were yet more challenges for Annette. She eventually decided to leave school after completing Year 10. An arduous daily commute ultimately took its toll. “I had to get up at 5.30am and catch two different trains to get to school. I didn’t get home till six o’clock at night and I found it really tiring.”

Instead, Annette channelled her energy into securing employment. She embarked on a six month office administration course within a Tafe class for hearing impaired students. After completing her studies, she applied for a job as a data entry operator with the Brisbane City Council.

“The HR officer offered to arrange an interpreter for my interview but I was determined to go it alone – I wanted to show them I could do it by myself,” Annette says. Her independence paid off and, to her absolute delight, she landed the job.

“My work mates were very good. They were very patient with me.”

Annette was making her way in the world, on her terms, surrounded by loving friends and family as well as supportive colleagues who valued and enjoyed her contribution to the office environment. She continued to work in various governmental administrative roles until she suffered a devastating blow in her early 30s.

Her limited hearing had begun to further decline – decreasing by an alarming 30 per cent. Up until that time, she’d relied on lip reading and bi-lateral hearing aids for as long as she could remember. Those former life rafts had suddenly left her adrift as communication became increasingly difficult. She describes this period as a ‘communication breakdown’ that led to a ‘mental breakdown’.

“Looking back, I can see now that I was suffering from depression. I felt really isolated and my self-esteem was hit hard,” she says. “I cried and cried. I felt completely lost.”

When her audiologist suggested Annette consider a cochlear implant, she emphatically refused. “It was relatively new technology at that time and I felt uncomfortable about it,” she says. “I had totally the wrong impression about cochlear implants. I was concerned they’d somehow make me robotic!”

Despite her initial hesitations, she began researching online and thinking about how an implant could potentially help her communication and her career. Ultimately, the deal was sealed after she met a satisfied cochlear implant recipient. “I watched him change over the following two years. He had the very best of outcomes. His communication improved a great deal.”

Around this time, she also connected with the Cochlear Awareness Network (CAN) who provided further information and facilitated introductions for Annette to meet other success stories, who generously shared their experiences and helped allay her fears.

In 2007, aged in her mid-30s, Annette made the decision to have a cochlear implant. On the day of her surgery, her mother was by her side just as she had been throughout the difficult decision-making process. “I remember being so scared on the way to the hospital that I told my Mum to turn the car around because I wanted to go home!”

Despite her fear, she bravely went through with the procedure. “It made me feel safe having my Mum with me as they wheeled me into the operating theatre,” Annette recalls. The procedure to insert the cochlear implant only required an overnight hospital stay.

The following two weeks were wracked with anticipation as Annette awaited her ‘switch on’ whereby her external sound processor was programmed and activated. “I was so nervous,” she says. “I didn’t think it would work for me. After all, I was born deaf and had been deaf for so many years.”

“When the audiologist started the activation process, gradually she increased the volume until I heard the first tiny soft sound, like a BING! I burst into tears – it was just so emotional,” Annette says.

She describes the following weeks and months as being both wonderful and overwhelming. “So many new noises were coming at me all at once. Birds singing, waves crashing, cars driving, footsteps ... it was very confusing. I jumped a lot!” Annette remembers experimenting with every household sound imaginable, from boiling kettles to running taps. She even smashed a glass! “I tested every possible sound,” she laughs.

Meanwhile, at work she was tormented by a recurring whooshing noise that



ANNETTE GILMORE-SCOTT