



CHARLES RAFSHOON

Rachel Chaikof, 14, one of the first children to receive a cochlear implant, says her Web site can show the deaf how procedure can change their life.

Hear and Now

Alpharetta teen encourages and educates others about cochlear implants

MELISSA SCHENKMAN
The Jewish Times

One of the earliest cochlear implant recipients is using her experiences and award-winning Web site to educate others about a device that is profoundly changing the world of the deaf.

The site, www.cochlearimplantonline.com, was created by Rachel Chaikof, who, when she was 2, became one of the first children to receive the Nucleus 22, the first multi-channel cochlear implant available in the United States. A cochlear implant is an electronic device that enables people who are profoundly deaf to hear and speak more like people with normal hearing.

"We were all guinea pigs at the time," Rachel's mother, Melissa, writes on her daughter's Web site. "No one knew what to expect."

Today, Rachel, who is almost 15, is an eighth-grade honors student at Haynes Bridge Middle School in Alpharetta, who easily communicates with the hearing world.

"I can speak and communicate with other people around me, which makes me feel wonderful," Rachel writes on her Web site. "When I am at a party I can talk to many people and not worry about lip reading. Using the phone, I can speak to my friends and grandparents."

An estimated 4,000 people annually receive cochlear implants, according to the *Boston Globe*—including children as young as 12 months. With approximately one in every 1,000 children born deaf, those numbers are likely to increase, continuing a long-running debate among deaf people about whether cochlear implants are eroding a unique culture that relies on signing, not hearing.

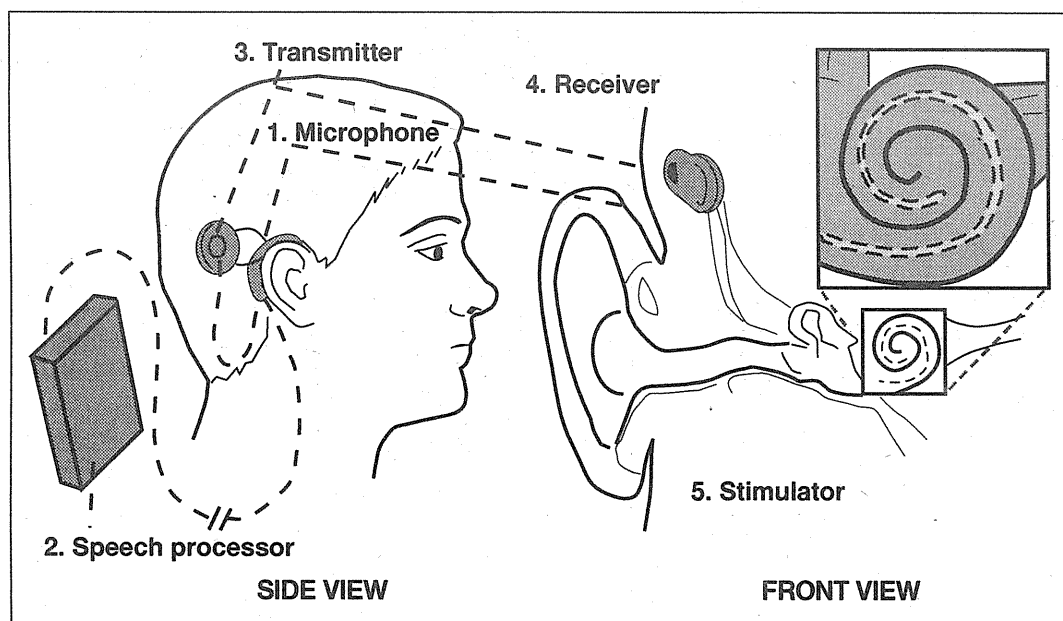
To some deaf people, deafness is not a disability and they view cochlear implants as an attempt to destroy their culture. But the National Deaf Association, a longtime opponent of implants, recently changed its stand against the implants and is now calling for more diverse attitudes.

For her part, Rachel simply wants to make a difference in the lives of people who are deaf.

Her Web site, she says, can show deaf people "how it will change their life, if they were to get a cochlear implant and how it would make a huge difference for them."

On the site, Rachel writes candidly about the opportunities the implant has given her, including membership in the Junior Beta Club, an honor society and community service group. She is a straight-A student and only gets help with language arts.

Rachel's Web site won first place in the Georgia Tech-



nology Fair's Intranet/Internet category for seventh and eighth graders the weekend of March 9. Earlier, her site took first place in the same category at the North Fulton County Technology Fair at Riverwood High School.

Rachel's mother beams at the achievements of Rachel and her younger sister, Jessica — who is also deaf and received her implant when she was 15 months old — but admits it wasn't easy.

For instance, as a curious toddler, Rachel would touch a hot stove, not understanding it was dangerous. The only way to teach her not to touch it was to slap her hand away, Melissa Chaikof recalled.

The cochlear implant changed all that. Surgeons cut a tunnel through the mastoid bone behind Rachel's ear and implanted a wire containing several electrodes into her damaged cochlea, a tiny, liquid-filled structure that moves sounds to the auditory nerve and brain.

A hearing aid-sized microphone worn behind the ear captures and encodes the sounds and sends them to the electrodes, which stimulate the auditory nerve.

People with implants can't hear as well as people with normal hearing, say experts, but if a child receives an implant before he or she is 4, the ability to pick up sounds is greatly improved.

After Rachel got her implant, an auditory-verbal therapist taught her how to listen and hear without lip-reading.

Rachel's therapist, Mary Ann Costin of the Auditory-Verbal Center of Atlanta, says Rachel showed great patience and perseverance.

"Of all the children I have worked with in the 17 years I have been a therapist, there was just something different about Rachel," Costin said. "She was one of the most creative, focused, serious and persistent children I have ever worked with."

Costin also credits Melissa Chaikof for Rachel's success. "I learned more from Melissa than I ever taught her," said Costin. "She was incredibly committed to the auditory-verbal approach and I could not have helped Rachel without her."

Melissa worked with Rachel every day to supplement the lessons she received at the Auditory-Verbal Center.

"It's a parent-centered approach, where the parent is the primary language role model in the beginning and later becomes the primary teacher," said Melissa Chaikof, who took the same approach with Jessica, who is six years younger than her sister.

Today, Melissa Chaikof writes on Rachel's Web site, her younger daughter's voice quality "is totally natural, and she enjoys singing. She has been and will continue to be fully mainstreamed in school."

In addition to personal stories, Rachel's Web site contains a wealth of useful information. For example, video clips show Web surfers how well children with cochlear implants can hear and talk.

There is also a section aimed at calming parent's fears about their children's delayed sitting or walking skills. When children have a damaged cochlea, their vestibular system — which is located in the inner ear and controls muscle tone, response to gravity, balance and motor skills — can also be affected.

Rachel also provides information on the different brands of cochlear implants. Most implants cost around \$20,000 and are covered by many health insurance plans.

"I wanted to provide as much information as possible," Rachel said. "I want parents who are considering getting their child a cochlear implant to see how this will improve their child's speech and hearing."

Rachel's site includes a message board, which lets children and adults with cochlear implants share their experiences.

"I set the message board up so other teen-agers could talk about their experience and share ideas. Parents can learn from us," Rachel said.

Cochlear implants were a hot-button issue when Rachel had her implant, but Melissa Chaikof knew she was doing the right thing for her daughter.

"I used to say 'Wait until these children are old enough to speak up for themselves.' With the Web site, Rachel has done that," she said. □

For more information on the Auditory-Verbal Center of Atlanta, call (404)-815-4321 or visit www.avc-atlanta.org.

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