

## Powering Potential Podcast

Season 2, Episode 5: Profoundly Normal

Connor:

Hearing loss was never a defining feature for me. It was never something that was an identity for me. I just was a normal kid with a hearing loss. I was always treated equal to my brother and my sisters. I was always encouraged to keep being better. I was never allowed to use my hearing loss as a crutch for poor behavior or for bad grades. I was like any kid. Yes, I did poor on some tests, but I could never say, "Well, I didn't hear the instruction" because that wasn't an answer.

Dr. Teresa Caraway:

Welcome to Season Two of *Powering Potential*, a podcast from Hearing First where we explore the unique joys and challenges of growing up with hearing loss. I'm Dr. Teresa Caraway, your host, a mother, and a speech-language pathologist specializing in Listening and Spoken Language. In Season Two, we'll get to know six incredible teens and young adults who are learning to navigate the hearing world as individuals with hearing loss.

Just a normal kid: So many teens and young adults on the Listening and Spoken Language journey feel the way that Connor feels. They're just normal kids dealing with the ups and downs of growing up, managing the stress of final exams, and going on those nerve-racking first dates—just as if they had typical hearing. When a child is diagnosed with hearing loss, parents often wonder if they'll be able to lead "normal lives." In the last season of *Powering Potential*, we heard from parents that redefining what normal means for their family was an important part of the healing process

after diagnosis. One of the best decisions a family can make on the journey is to treat their child with hearing loss the same way they'd treat a child with typical hearing, just like Connor's family did. In this episode, we'll get to hear how that decision pays off in the stories of our young friends.

Let's begin with Harper. I've known this family since she was a baby. When she was diagnosed with hearing loss, Harper's parents decided to go all in on Listening and Spoken Language so that she could have normal experiences that a child with typical hearing would have. I love the way this family found ways to use strategies and games to help their daughter develop Listening and Spoken Language. One of these strategies was to use audition first to facilitate her auditory attention. They placed emphasis on listening by drawing her attention to the object being discussed rather than on their mouths as they were speaking. This provided Harper the opportunity to focus and strengthen her reliance on listening. Today, Harper is an independent young woman who loves going to camp.

Tell me about summer camp. What kind of camp it is, how old were you when you started going, and how long you go there for?

Harper:

Okay, well, it's four weeks in Colorado without my parents, so it's like an overnight one. You stay in cabins, but there's still outlets, which is good for my ear stuff. And so, I was supposed to go when I was 9—like, that's the first year you can go—but my mom and dad didn't think I was ready. They didn't think I was ready because of, like, my ear stuff. I didn't really do everything on my own yet. I just needed

another year to, like, fully adapt to it and do everything by myself.

Dr. Caraway: But your first year was 10 years old?

Harper: Yes.

Dr. Caraway: Because they were getting you ready ... They needed you to be fully independent of taking care of your equipment? Okay.

Harper: Yeah, first year was 10 years old. And this summer will be my fourth summer.

Dr. Caraway: Wow. You must really like it.

Harper: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Caraway: Yeah.

Harper: There's horseback riding, hiking, fishing ... There's a lot of stuff. Mostly, I think, what I like to do is hiking and horseback riding because we're in Colorado—hiking is a good thing; you can't really hike here—and horseback riding is nice too because it's like, I'm not going to horseback ride at my house.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah. In the city, yeah.

So, tell me how you manage your equipment when you're at camp.

Harper: I keep my charger in my dryer. It depends on where the outlets are in the cabin. But I guess last year, I just kept them on this little stool, like, behind my bed, like, the bottom bed, which ... That was also nice that I didn't have a bunkmate 'cause [my hearing equipment] was down there. And then the outlet was over here and it was ... So when I wake up, I go down, I

get my ears, and I usually like to sit on my bed and get the tape and, like, do it as I'm sitting on my bed. And then I always brush my hair before I put them on.

So I brush my hair first. And then at night, I go down [to the bottom bunk], and I put them up [in the dryer] and I go back up [to my top bunk], and I go [to] sleep.

Dr. Caraway:

Yeah.

What Harper's story tells me is that having hearing loss doesn't hold her back. Taking care of her hearing technology is simply part of her routine—not so different from brushing her teeth or combing her hair. She's able to participate in all the normal activities at camp. Her enthusiasm isn't limited to camp activities. During the school year, she tried out for the cheerleading squad. When I heard her story, I couldn't help but reflect on how far hearing healthcare has come in the last 20 years. Despite her profound deafness, Harper is able to participate fully in an activity that requires excellent listening, speaking, and, well, yelling abilities.

Harper:

I'm on the cheer team. That's one of my favorite things. I'm really close with everybody on the team, [and] I know people from the grade below me.

Dr. Caraway:

Okay. So did you have to try out?

Harper:

Yes. I tried out [at] the end of sixth grade for, like, last year's team and I made it. There were only 37 people that tried out that time and 20 can make it. But this year, I tried out again and there were 52 people that tried out and only 20 made it.

Dr. Caraway: What's your very best thing?

Harper: Probably yelling.

Dr. Caraway: Yelling?

Harper: Yeah.

In our tryout process, we spirit before we do everything. So like, first you spirit before you do your tumbling. And then you spirit again. Then you jump, and then you spirit again. You spirit between everything.

Dr. Caraway: Okay.

And is a spirit like a cheer that you have to do?

Harper: It's like, "Go big blue," and then you do that. And also, I'm very loud and sharp, and I think that's one of my best things.

Dr. Caraway: Jayden and Zach keep full and busy schedules too, participating in a variety of activities alongside their hearing friends.

All right, so when you're playing basketball, do your implants ever fall off?

Jayden: I wear a headband, so it keeps it tight and together. I wear a tape with the hearing aid so that helps me when I run around, [and] do cross country and track and stuff. I mean, I don't wear headbands, but I use those tapes.

Dr. Caraway: Do they not fall off when you sweat?

Jayden: No.

Dr. Caraway: And when you're doing the broad jump ... Is it broad jump or running jump?

Jayden: Long jump.

Dr. Caraway: Long jump, okay. I knew I said it wrong.

So, okay Zach, what is your summer schedule?

Zach: So I wake up around 6:30 in the morning, head out to the fieldhouse to do football workouts. Come home. I eat, take a shower, and go to work from 11:00 [a.m.] to 6:00 [p.m.]. And then I have personal training from 6:30 to about 9:00, 9:30. And then I come home, [and] either practice my guitar or play video games.

Dr. Caraway: So you wear your hearing aids when you play football?

Zach: I do.

Dr. Caraway: And so, can you hear your coach well and your teammates well?

Zach: I mean, I can hear everything perfectly.

Dr. Caraway: So what, I'm going to say hacks, [what hacks] have you learned? [What] tricks have you learned to make it better with your hearing aids?

Zach: I mean, football was the only sport that, like I said, where a headband keeps them on. They don't fly out whenever you get hit, but even without the headband, they're not going to move. They're in there. They're not moving. And even if they do come out, they're going to get caught in the helmet. So it's all good.

Dr. Caraway: Okay.

Talk to me about getting your driver's license.

- Zach: I always considered myself to be a really good driver. So actually ... I wouldn't even say it was rough; it was easy. Everything was easy. [It] came easy to me. I think I started, like, driving a go-cart in, like, elementary school. So that experience alone [made it easier]. And then, like, [I also had experience driving] ATVs and four-wheelers, all that kind of stuff.
- Dr. Caraway: So when you went to take your driver's test and there's an examiner sitting on the other side [of the car], were you ever nervous about making sure you could hear him—
- Zach: No.
- Dr. Caraway: Or anything like that?
- Zach: It was always perfectly fine with me. Like, I never worried about it. [I] never worried about anything in general.
- Dr. Caraway: Jayden and Zach both wear headbands to keep their hearing technology in place during rigorous sports. Today, people with hearing loss can play virtually any sport with some simple hacks to keep their hearing technology safe and dry. And, included in modern day sports, of course, is dating and all the feelings that go with it: the butterflies in the stomach when you meet someone you like, the thrill of a first kiss, that indescribable feeling of falling in love. And some of our friends have been on that roller coaster of love already and share their experiences with us here.
- I saw you out with a young woman.
- Peter: That is my girlfriend. Yeah, it's a year and a half Saturday. So, she's a year younger than me, but we were in the same classes 'cause

she's, like, a math genius. So, like, I thought I was good at math because I was in AP calculus or whatever, which is already advanced math. But she was doing that a year younger than me. All the credit [in] the world to my girlfriend because she's looked beyond the fact that I'm deaf.

Like, I've asked her about this before, 'cause I'm really self-conscious about it when it comes to dating. 'Cause like, that's super important. And I feel like there's a stigma [around dating someone who's deaf], I'm sure. So like, I've asked her about it, like, very upfront. I'm like, "So why?" I know why she likes me, don't get that wrong, don't get that wrong. But, like, it's more of like, "What's it like dating somebody [who's] deaf?" Like, I know that there's a stigma around it. And so, I asked her, and she was like, "I haven't viewed you as deaf. To me, you're just Peter." And that made me feel good. But, like, when they meet me, they're like, "He's just one of us. He's cool. He just happens to be deaf."

Dr. Caraway:

Peter is no different from any other typical teen, feeling a little bit self-conscious about what makes him different. Sometimes the best way forward is to address it head on. It's another form of self-advocacy of the kind we explored in episode four.

Connor is a little bit older than Peter and has more experience to share when it comes to love and dating. He and his fiancé just moved to a new city together and [are] planning on starting a family someday.

So, talk to me about dating.

- Connor: So, I had a couple of girlfriends in high school, but they were all good girlfriends. I've always been good with dating past high school, but it was tough in high school because people are judgmental if it's something different. ... You know?
- Dr. Caraway: Yeah.
- I think dating in high school is tough, period.
- Connor: It is. As somebody with a hearing loss, [I always say that] anybody that won't date you because of a hearing loss, you don't want to be with that person at all.
- Dr. Caraway: Yeah. All right.
- So fast-forward a little bit. I've heard a rumor that you are engaged.
- Connor: So I met my fiancé in graduate school. Her name is Stevie. She is also an audiologist now. Funny enough about Stevie, she was totally on the opposite scene of the Listening and Spoken Language [spectrum]. She did not like LSL. She was totally all sign and I changed her. She had never met somebody who was successful with Listening and Spoken Language. I think I kind of changed ... Obviously I changed her heart a little bit because she now works for a place who does Listening and Spoken Language and she is getting her LSL license.
- Dr. Caraway: Yeah.
- So tell me about getting engaged, about [your] fiancé, about that relationship.

- Connor: So we dated for a little over three years. We met the first year of our graduate school. And we were together through the four years, and we're still together.
- Well, our engagement ... The way I proposed kind of got messed up. I was going to propose during a picture thing, but the pictures got messed up due to a big storm. So, what I did was is I took her to the first Starbucks that we ever did a date at and I proposed to her there.
- Dr. Caraway: What I hope you'll take away from this episode is that once a child moves through the first few years of learning to listen and talk, life can look pretty normal. The Listening and Spoken Language journey is not so different from any teen's journey. It can be full of summer camp, cheerleading, learning to drive, and falling in love. I'd like to close with Zach, who sums up his experience as a teen with hearing loss.
- Zach: I still don't feel any different, like, I honestly forget that I'm deaf most of the time.
- Dr. Caraway: With early intervention, the right hearing technology, and a solid foundation of Listening and Spoken Language, anything is possible for a teen with profound hearing loss. Life can feel profoundly normal.
- Check out episode six, our season finale of *Powering Potential*, where we'll talk about what lies ahead for the teens.
- Announcer: This podcast is a production of Hearing First, an educational endeavor of the Oberkotter Foundation. Be sure to subscribe now on Apple, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you listen to hear the latest episodes. You can also find the *Powering Potential* podcast on our

website, [Hearingfirst.org](https://www.hearingfirst.org), along with additional resources and information about Listening and Spoken Language. Thanks for listening.