

LISTENING IN WITH RILEY

Introduction: Welcome to Listening In. In this video series, you'll hear stories from thriving young adults who happen to have hearing loss. They'll share what it was like growing up deaf and how they learned to listen, talk and reach their dreams.

Meet Riley. Her bright future started when she was just a few days old. Because of the newborn hearing screening her hearing loss was identified early and she received her hearing aids at just 3 months old. Let's listen in.

Dr. Caraway: Hey, Riley. How are you? Oh, it's so good to see you.

Riley: It's good to see you too.

Dr. Caraway: I can't believe that you're all grown up and beautiful and just amazing. So, I know, I'm looking forward to talking to you guys. Oh, it'll be great fun to catch up.

Riley: Yes. it will.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah. All right, well come on in and have a seat. So, I'm going to roll back the clock a little bit, okay? Little baby Riley comes into the world. And one of the things that's kind of special is you were one of the first babies who received a newborn hearing screening in Tulsa. In that part of the state of Oklahoma. Yeah. And so, Mom, Merry?

Merry: It was very difficult. I just remember we were so happy to have our daughter, but just really not prepared I think, emotionally, for a diagnosis of a hearing loss and just really kind of afraid of what her future was going to look like.

Dr. Caraway: What were you thinking?

Merry: I was really just kind of devastated. I just remember crying a lot. And of course, you've got all the new mom hormones too.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah.

Merry: And so, I was... I would take her to a lot of her appointments, and she had just some other issues that I think were related to her diagnosis. But at the time, so she had a loss of balance, so we're going to neurologists. So just some scary things all happening at once.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah. So how old were you when you got your first set of hearing aids?

Merry: I think she was probably three months that she did the body worn hearing aids.

Dr. Caraway: And so, three months of age. And you're trying to keep hearing aids on a little three-month-old baby. So, we're going to change your middle name to perseverance, by the way, because that's what it took right. So, when you first had the diagnosis, Merry, how

did you decide or know how you wanted Riley to communicate and how you wanted to communicate with her?

Merry: I think originally we just started looking at the options that were in Tulsa. We got connected with Sooner Care and we went to a daycare that was in Tulsa that mainly just did sign language was their main form of communication. But I just remember going through that and not that it's a wonderful organization, but I just thought that's not what I want from my daughter. And then we, I think we tried to start doing some speech therapy. She didn't have any hearing, even with her body worn aids. So that was a little bit difficult. And I think just after a lot of time talking about it, we just felt very comforted knowing that that was the right option of doing the implant. But it was an option that we had to wait, which was hard.

Dr. Caraway: Because of the FDA and the requirements and so.

Merry: Yes.

Dr. Caraway: Well, along that way, you met some special friends then?

Riley: I did.

Dr. Caraway: Because you were going to schools where you were the only child that had hearing loss. Right?

Riley: Yes ma'am.

Dr. Caraway: And the only one that you knew really that had cochlear implants?

Riley: Yes.

Dr. Caraway: Did you ever have a time when you felt like other kids were mean or made fun of your hearing aids or your cochlear implants?

Riley: At the time probably, middle school is my hardest season.

Dr. Caraway: Middle school's the pit. It just is hard isn't it?

Riley: Yes. It was a hard season for sure. I probably had a lot of nights coming home and I was like, this is not fun. And to kind of figuring out my self-worth, I think that really helped me through the seasons of, not knowing where my place was who my friendships were, and telling other people, telling me who I am. And I knew it wasn't true. So, yes.

Dr. Caraway: And so when Riley would come home and those middle school days, which we know are just can be the pits and she would talk about and someone that might be being mean or that had hurt her feelings. What did you say? How did you handle that to grow her in her confidence and her ability to handle it?

Merry: It's hard. I think any mom finds it hard when your child is being made fun of or feeling like they're picked on. But we would just really kind of talk through. So what are you know, what are you wanting to happen? Do you want for us to get involved or do you want to take care of it? So we would just talk through what Riley was wanting. And then usually they don't want the parents to get involved. So she would choose to do it. And we would just talk through, how does that look to, you know, the teacher? You say something to the other kids? And so she would figure it out and I don't remember much where I ended up getting involved at all. She would do most of it. And wasn't always perfect or that she would see a resolution But she, I think, felt like she had the power to speak up and tell people it wasn't okay.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah. So, all right, so tell me I don't what did you major in, in college, in undergrad?

Riley: Yes, I got undergrad in Human Development and Family Science with the Child and Family Services track.

Dr. Caraway: Okay, and so what would be your dream job someday?

Riley: If we're looking way down the road, I would love to have, maybe not my own practice, but maybe looking into that as well. But to be able to work with a Christian organization, that's probably one of my biggest passions. It's helping people and relationships is one of the my favorite things to do, learn and study and so I'm excited about that.

Dr. Caraway: You know, it's really interesting because that's what communication's about isn't it, is making connections and having relationships with other people.

Riley: Yes.

Dr. Caraway: And it's a real strength of yours.

Riley: Yes. I had to learn. I mean, it's practically my whole life speech therapy and be able to learn how to communicate was probably one of the first things I had to ever learn was speech, spoken language and stuff like that.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah. So that gift of listening and spoken language has helped make you in terms of how what you want to do and how you want to help other people and connect with them and understand people and communicate with them.

Riley: Yes.

Dr. Caraway: That's awesome. Riley, that's terrific. I love that.

Riley: Thank you.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah. So, I'm curious, tell me more about your preparation for college.

Riley: Well, I knew I was starting from a fresh start and I really, really wanted to see if I can kind of motivate myself to basically do most of college without much of an assistance, because

I wanted to see what that felt like and what that would look basically look like. And I just kind of ask for the bare minimum if I need any more. They were able to give me those resources and then I just had really good classmates in the; if I misheard them, they all whispered to me. So I've built really good relationship with my peers.

Dr. Caraway: So you kind of had wing women.

Riley: Yes.

Dr. Caraway: Got you your friends that kind of helped you out or that you could ask. Yeah.

Riley: Yes.

Dr. Caraway: So when you went to college, did you know your roommate?

Riley: I did not. I went potluck.

Dr. Caraway: Really? So tell me about that.

Riley: Really sweet girls. I lived in that dorm for like a couple weeks, and then I moved into the sorority house where I lived in a room with three other girls. And we just kind of learned how to navigate. Like none of us knew each other and became friends that way as well.

Dr. Caraway: So, yeah, that's tough to do. Did you tell them about your hearing loss?

Riley: Yes, I think they knew pretty early on because I can't hear when I sleep and so they thought I was the best roommate in that situation. But it was exciting to I mean, I learn my friendships really quickly because you can find out if they're accepting or not. And so I that is probably one of my favorite blessings of hearing loss, because I can see who my true friends are really quickly and know where my boundaries are with other people as well. And so.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah. Okay. So, do you remember, so, in terms of what was hard for you in college?

Riley: I think college is a lot more in bigger groups. And I think the probably the hardest part was being in the large groups and trying to hear everything and everyone was saying. And that was not just in classes where football games or sorority meetings. It was it was a challenge to be able to say, Hey can you repeat that? Or like, can I get the bullet points from that meeting? Or to be able to say, like, that's kind of frustrating for me just, not be able to hear everything was being said and kind of relying on other people to be telling me that information after it was already communicated. And so that was probably my biggest frustration. And the hardest challenge I had to go through was just trying to navigate a large setting like that.

Dr. Caraway: So what were your some of your strategies in those large settings?

Riley: I think just finding people around me that I trusted with information, especially meeting situations. But also kind of going to the professor or whoever is facilitating that meeting or

class or whoever and just say, 'Hey I'm hard of hearing can I ask you a couple questions that I might have not have grabbed in that meeting or whatever that situation was?'

Dr. Caraway: So, in terms of that, what do you think your mom did that helped you learn to advocate for yourself, to express what you needed when you didn't understand things? How you, all of that, how did you learn that? What do you think she did?

Riley: I think she did a lot about leading by example. And the way she carried herself and, asked for things. She's expecting me to do the same. And if I needed something, she made me ask and she did not speak for me. And just make sure I communicated what I needed, what I wanted, and if something was bothering me or something was not right. She's like, Riley, you say it. Like I think she gave a lot of tough love and I saw that very early on because I know that she loved me so dearly, but she wanted me to be able to do that on my own.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah, it's kind of the tough love. It would have been easier just to have done it for her. Right, Merry?

Merry: Yes.

Dr. Caraway: So how did. What did. How did you make your mind? And what kinds of things did you do?

Merry: I think earlier on, just when we'd go to IEPs or to other things, when they'd ask a question, I would look to Riley and say, Riley, what? What do you want? Or how do you want that to look like? And so she started probably with me modeling, first of, asking the questions to then her giving the answers and moving into kind of knowing what she wanted to ask.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah.

Riley: My mom was just a cheerleader. She didn't step in or do anything, and she just said, Hey, you got this. Gave me a couple advices here and there. But mainly I did all the talking.

Dr. Caraway: And I'm looking at you Merry, and it's making me cry. What advice or what piece of advice would you give to another family that might be just finding out their babies deaf or heard of hearing?

Riley: I just wanted to encourage them just the way my parents were to me to not baby them and not to take the easy road out to challenge them and just have high hopes for them because they will accomplish whatever they set their minds into. And if they fail, they fail. If they succeed, they succeed and just do those life moments and being encouraging and let them make those first steps for themselves and, and just be loving, because it's really, really hard to be able to be on this side as well. And so yeah.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah, that's great advice great wisdom great insight. How about you Merry? What would you tell a mom who's just finding out that their baby is deaf?

Merry: I think the thing that helped us most, too, was running into some families earlier on that was that were further down the journey so they could give us courage and encouragement of the process. It's a hard journey, but well worth it, because I mean there's a lot of time spent I mean, not just at speech therapy, but hours and hours of helping your child be the best that they can and speak and listen. And so it's a hard journey. But I got like a beautifully wonderful daughter who I have no concerns about going off on her own and being able to do that. And that's what we wanted when we started. So that's the encouragement that I would give to new families, is just be there. It seems like a tough right at the beginning, but it really comes together at the end.

Riley: Yeah.

Merry: Yeah.

Dr. Caraway: It also sounds like it's allowed you two to cultivate a very special mother-daughter relationship.

Riley: For sure. And I just also, like don't do this life alone. Like, invite your friends and family to do it because it's a community battle to do together. And I would not have change it to the world. Yeah.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah. Well, those are wise words, Ms. Riley. Well, I had a blast getting to catch up with you and the amazing beautiful young woman that you are. I mean I just marvel at you.

Riley: Yeah.

Dr. Caraway: Well, thank you guys.

Riley: Thank you.

Conclusion: For more inspiring stories and to learn about what's possible for children with hearing loss visit [HearingFirst.org](https://www.hearingfirst.org).