



## **NEWS UPDATE**

# National Cochlear Implant Insurance Advocacy Program... and it's Free!

In 2002, Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Roberson launched the Let Them Hear Foundation ("LTHF") to improve the lives of hearing-impaired children in the United States and around the world. Since its inception, LTHF has offered its services on four continents and has trained doctors from 17 countries around the world.

The Foundation maintains laser-like focus in four areas: 1) Hearing, 2) Education, 3) Access and 4) Research. Each area is important if we are to obtain our goal of changing the way the world hears.

***This month we concentrate on Access, specifically the world-class work of our Insurance Advocacy Program.***

The Foundation's Insurance Advocacy Program assists hearing-

impaired individuals appeal denials by their insurance company related to their hearing impairment. These services are provided **free of charge** to all families.

Sheri Byrne-Haber is the Foundation's Director of Advocacy. Sheri is a long-time advocate for the rights of hearing-impaired children, including her teenage daughter Patricia. Ms. Byrne-Haber, JD, passed the Bar Exam in July of 1997. She began assisting families with appeals on her own before joining LTHF in September of 2004. She has been very busy since then!

In 2006, the Insurance Advocacy Program accepted 488 cases from 42 states. 273 of those cases have been completed to date with 273 wins! Of those, 167 of the cases were for bilateral cochlear implantation.

Many insurance companies deny coverage of bilateral cochlear implants stating it is  
*(Continued on pg 2.)*

### **AT A GLANCE** **2006 INSURANCE** **ADVOCACY PROGRAM**

- 488 cases from 42 states
- 273 cases completed
- 273 wins
- 167 of the cases were for bilateral cochlear implantation



**"Thank You for Partnering with Us"**

“experimental,” “investigational,” “unproven,” or “not approved by the FDA.” All of these claims are false. Many times the insurance companies have not read the updated information that is available. So Ms. Byrne-Haber and her staff have won every case including eight insurance commissioner rulings and 21 external reviewer findings, all in favor of bilateral implantation. This is changing the way people hear. In 2006 alone, LTHF insurance advocacy wins have resulted in bilateral coverage being added to the insurance plans of almost 60 million people!

In this edition you'll meet Maren Monticelli, Anna Olsson, and Thornton, “Stoney” Miller—three incredible stories of people we have helped. Actually, they are people you have helped... because we could not do this work without the generous donations of people like you.

LTHF is a 501(c)(3) non-profit and the insurance Advocacy Program operates entirely from donations and grants. If you would like to support this worthwhile cause, or think you have an insurance denial that might benefit from LTHF assistance, please visit <http://advocacy.letthemhear.org> 🇺🇸

*You may also contact us by e-mail at [advocacy@letthemhear.org](mailto:advocacy@letthemhear.org) or by calling 877 HEAR HELP (877 432-7435).*

**Sheri Byrne-Haber**  
*Director of Advocacy*

**Amy Brown**  
*Associate Director of Advocacy*

**Judy Mosher**  
*Program Administrator*

**Senior Legal Interns**

Chris Thiemann

Samar Malik

Sherry Ferraro

Zack Richards

**Legal Interns**

Michael Cobden

Montoya McGee

Stephen Shea

## **Maren Monticelli, 3 years old, receives second Nucleus Freedom Device**

**M**aren loves to recite her favorite book, “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?” She loves to watch, dance, and sing along to her favorite movie, *Barbie and the Twelve Dancing Princesses*. She enjoys talking to her siblings and telling her parents how much she loves them.

This all seems quite normal for a three-and-a-half year old—but it is extra-special for Maren who was born deaf. Like most families with a deaf newborn, Maren’s family had no history of hearing impairment. Thankfully the discovery was made early when Maren failed the newborn hearing screening test administered at the hospital. Follow-up testing confirmed that Maren was profoundly deaf. Her parents now had some difficult choices to make.

Maren’s parents, Andy and Daisy Monticelli, immediately began to research their options. Soon they realized that a cochlear implant would allow Maren to hear and speak so she would have the same opportunities and experiences they had in life.

Maren received her first cochlear implant, a Nucleus 24 device, when she was 11 months old. At the time, she was the youngest cochlear implant recipient in the State of Oregon. After her implant was activated she immediately began speaking—it was a wonderful first birthday present in 2004. Soon her parents began to investigate bilateral implantation. In the spring of 2005, they decided to proceed with a second cochlear implant for Maren, but were shocked when their insurer, one of the Blue Cross / Blue Shield companies, denied coverage for Maren’s second cochlear implant. The insurance company claimed the second device was

experimental and investigational. The parents thought their dreams for their little girl would be put on hold.

In the fall of 2005, Don Plapinger, an audiologist at Oregon Health and Science University, had told Maren’s mother about a California organization that works on behalf of patients to fight insurance companies for cochlear implants. Daisy Monticelli emailed the LTHF after seeing the website. Ms. Byrne-Haber assured Mrs. Monticelli that she would fight on her behalf, taking the case within a few hours of her initial email with Mrs. Monticelli.

Maren’s case was particularly



*Maren Monticelli*

complicated due to the state law governing her father’s insurance plan. But after much work by LTHF’s legal team, Maren was back at Oregon Health and Science University for her second cochlear implant! Maren continues her great progress in both expressive and receptive speech and language. She fully participates in her Montessori preschool class where all the other students have normal hearing.

Daisy Monticelli credits the staff of the Let Them Hear Foundation Insurance Advocacy Program for their hard work and dedication, which went “above and beyond” the family’s expectations. “Even when it looked like we had hit a brick wall in the appeal process, Sheri kept going. Her tenacity and perseverance in the appeal not only helped Maren; it influenced Blue Cross/Blue Shield to reconsider their insurance policy.” Maren’s appeal was one of several with HCSC, an affiliated group of four Blue Cross states (Texas,

Illinois, Oklahoma, and New Mexico). In September of 2006, HCSC changed its overall policy, resulting in 11 million subscribers receiving automatic coverage for bilateral cochlear implants without requiring appeals.

## Anna Olsson, Simultaneous Bilateral Implant, Med-EI

**W**hen Anna Olsson was only one month old she was diagnosed with a profound hearing impairment.

Her hearing loss was so severe that she failed to respond to sound at 125 decibels – roughly the sound of a 747 jet taking off. Anna's parents, Kristy and Bob Olsson, wanted immediately to give Anna the opportunity to hear and speak. After learning that she was too young for bilateral cochlear implants at six weeks of age, Anna was fitted with the most powerful hearing aids available. But even those devices could not provide her with the ability to develop speech.



*Anna Olsson*

When Anna was two months old, she was placed in an early intervention program, where therapy was provided to help her develop language while waiting to be implanted. During this time she went through the medical evaluations necessary to be declared a

bilateral cochlear implant candidate. Due to Anna's level of deafness and her age, she was considered a prime candidate. However, Anna's parents were angry and dumfounded when they learned that Bob's insurance contained a clause which excluded all cochlear implants (so the insurer refused to provide coverage for even one cochlear implant, much less two). At a cost of \$120,000, the Olssons were not in a position where they could afford this surgery themselves, but their income was too high for public assistance.

By the time the insurance denials had run their course, Anna was 13 months old, already meeting the optimum window for implanting children (12 to 18 months of age). Kristy Olsson knew that every month counted when it came to helping Anna achieve optimal results.

Mrs. Olsson spoke to the audiologist at the Koss Cochlear Implant Center in Wisconsin, who referred the Olssons to our Insurance Advocacy Program. As is customary, the interface with LTHF was accomplished by a combination of telephone, the Internet, and fax. "Unfortunately, I get to meet less than 5% of our appeals clients," notes Ms. Byrne-Haber. "The good news is that in-person contact is rarely essential. That is how we are able to have a nationwide program without having employees and offices in every state."

Because Bob's plan was self-insured, Ms. Byrne-Haber went straight to the top by mailing comprehensive packages outlining the illegality of the contract exclusion to the entire Board of Directors. As a result of her communications with the Board, the denial was overturned and Anna received bilateral Med-EI cochlear implants, with activation in September of 2006.

As Paul Harvey is famous for saying: "And now, the rest of the story." At 18 months of age (four months post-activation), Anna's language progress is nothing short of amazing. She has already developed a 15-word vocabulary, saying several words clearly including: "open," "ow," "Momma" and "Daddy" and "baba" for bottle.

Best of all, when Kristy or Bob call Anna, she hears them and comes running. Her excellent progress

continues—and we could not be happier to have been part of the process. 🏠

## Thornton "Stoney" Miller receives Advanced Bionics Clarion device in second ear

**T**hornton "Stoney" Miller was a normal hearing adult who contracted meningitis in 2004. Eleven months later he began to lose his hearing.

At first hearing aids helped, but as his hearing loss progressed, the aids became useless. By early September of 2005, "Stoney" was referred to Robert Peters, M.D. and his outstanding Dallas Otolaryngology Group in Texas for a cochlear implant evaluation. It was



*Thornton "Stoney" Miller*

determined in November 2005 that Mr. Miller was a very good candidate for cochlear implant surgery.

At this point in time, Mr. Miller attempted to lip read. He could not hear any spoken communication from friends or family, including his wife, Kay, and his six-year-old grandson, Chase. Mr. Miller couldn't watch TV, nor could he work the cash register at his 7-Eleven store when employees called in sick. He felt isolated and frustrated as a result of his hearing loss.



## Let Them Hear Foundation

1900 University Avenue, Suite 101,  
E. Palo Alto, CA 94303

[www.LetThemHear.org](http://www.LetThemHear.org)

FIRST CLASS  
U S POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
PERMIT NO. 39  
PALTO ALTO, CA

**"Your investments are  
changing the world"**

In December 2005, his insurer (United Healthcare) denied his request for a cochlear implant, stating that all implantable hearing devices were excluded from coverage. United Healthcare and 7-Eleven were unresponsive to Stoney, Kay, and Ms. Spicer (Dr. Peter's surgery coordinator). There appeared to be no way to get the denial overturned. Dr. Peters then suggested the Insurance Advocacy Program.

Immediately Ms. Byrne-Haber and LTHF became involved by contacting the General Counsel for United Healthcare. Mr. Miller received approval for his cochlear implant surgery in May 2006. His first implant was activated in June and by September, Mr. Miller felt that a second cochlear implant would be helpful. Unlike his first experience, United Healthcare approved this

request within a week!

Stoney and Kay once again enjoy going out to dinner with friends. Mr. Miller fully participates in conversations, even in noisy restaurants. Kay says the TV is back down to normal levels—and sometimes it is too low for her! Stoney now has wonderful conversations with his grandson. Overall, Mr. Miller says, "The quality of (my) life is great now."

(As a result of Thorton Miller's appeal, 7-Eleven now includes coverage for not only bilateral cochlear implants, but BAHA devices and hearing aids for all its employees who qualify for health insurance. We are aware that others have already benefited from the gains made through the tenacity of Thorton Miller and the LTHF Insurance Advocacy Program.) ✦

### Let Them Hear Named Top Organization in California!

The Let Them Hear Foundation was just named the 2007 Outstanding Organization by the California Hearing Loss Association. The award is presented to the top organization that provides services to those with hearing loss. We are very thankful to be honored in this way! It is a privilege to serve those who need help and to change the way the world hears.



**Headquarters, Palo Alto**  
1900 University Avenue, Suite 101 • E. Palo Alto, CA 94303  
Phone: 650-462-3143 • Fax: 650-462-3144  
**San Ramon**  
5801 Norris Canyon Road, Suite 200 • San Ramon, CA 94583  
Phone: 925-830-9116 • Fax: 925-866-1699

## The Team

Joseph Roberson, M.D.  
*Founder and President*

Robert C. McClelland, Ph.D.  
*Executive Director*

Reynold Bryan  
*Chief Operating Officer*

Joy Murdock, M.S.  
*Training & Speech Services*

Lisa Tonokawa, M.S.  
*Audiology, Dir. of Research*

Rebecca Highlander, M.A.  
*Audiology*

Annie Vranesic, M.A.  
*Audiology*

Sheri Byrne-Haber, J.D.  
*Director of Advocacy*

## Board of Directors

Joseph Roberson, M.D.

Margaret Costello, *Chair*

Kirk Dunn

Les Koonce

Jim Pollock

[www.LetThemHear.org](http://www.LetThemHear.org)