INDIA

Caregiver Name: Neha **Child: Aashi**
Age at Implantation: 3 **Age Today: 9**

I am a mother from India, and this is the story of my daughter, Aashi—a journey filled with uncertainty, resilience, and hope.

Our biggest challenge was late diagnosis. Aashi was diagnosed with hearing loss at the age of 2.5. Before that, we believed she was simply a late talker and that it was only a language delay. Like many parents, we were unaware of the early signs of hearing loss. We consulted multiple doctors, tried medicines, and explored other treatments, hoping her speech would one day come on its own. Unfortunately, this lack of awareness cost us valuable time.

When we finally understood that Aashi needed a cochlear implant, another major obstacle appeared, it was the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospitals were closed, elective surgeries were postponed, travel was restricted, and therapy services were almost all unavailable. Leading to her cochlear implant surgery to be delayed. However, Aashi was finally implanted at the age of 3 years and 4 months. Even after implantation though, access to receive therapy support was still extremely limited due to lockdowns, which continued to make our journey even more challenging.

In this phase of struggle, **our greatest support entered our lives. A woman came from the USA and came to us like a blessing—truly like God in human form. She became our biggest supporter, mentor, and motivator. Words are not enough to express our gratitude.** She guided us step by step, taught us even the smallest therapy techniques, and helped us understand how to build listening and speech naturally in daily life. She gave us free online therapy and guidance. She never took a single penny. Her selfless support transformed our journey and gave us strength when we felt lost. Along with her, our local audiologist in Bhopal was also extremely supportive and played an important role in Aashi's consistent progress.

Despite late implantation and limited therapy during COVID, Aashi showed remarkable growth. Today, **our greatest achievement is not just her speech and listening skills, but her confidence and overall development. Aashi has developed strong expertise in chess and has won many trophies. She loves dance, performs confidently, and is doing well in her studies**. Watching her express herself, compete,

and shine fills our hearts with pride. Every small milestone—responding to sound, saying a new word, expressing emotions—felt like a victory.

To other parents, **my advice is simple but heartfelt: do not wait. Early diagnosis and early intervention can change a child's life.** Start rigorous speech and auditory therapy but keep it playful and joyful. Make listening and speaking a part of everyday routines. Seek the right guidance, stay consistent, and believe in your child, even when progress feels slow.

To achieve better access to cochlear implantation, **we made several important changes. First, we educated ourselves thoroughly about hearing loss and cochlear implants instead of depending only on assumptions or partial information. We actively sought second opinions, connected with experienced professionals, and reached out to parent networks for guidance. We learned to advocate for our child**—asking the right questions, following up persistently with hospitals, and not accepting delays silently. We also reorganized our family priorities, emotionally and financially, to ensure that Aashi's surgery and post-implant care were not compromised. Most importantly, we changed our mindset from "waiting and hoping" to taking timely action, even in the most difficult circumstances.

Aashi's journey taught us that delays do not decide destiny. With awareness, timely action, and the right support, even a late start can lead to a powerful future.