

GUATEMALA

Caregiver Name: Astri
Age at Implantation: 4

Child: Esteban
Age Today: 16

I am Astri, mother of Esteban, an extraordinary young man with a cochlear implant living in Guatemala; a low-income country where access to hearing health remains unequal for many families.

When Esteban was born, we did not imagine that silence would be part of his early years. **The diagnosis of profound bilateral deafness confronted us with an unknown world, with our greatest challenges being emotional, economic, and accepting that the path to granting him access to hearing would be long, uncertain, and filled with barriers.** In 2013, after much effort, we managed to schedule his first surgery; the procedure lasted over 6 hours, making it a very traumatic experience. The medical team could not place the implant in his right ear due to a congenital malformation; we left the hospital with our spirits crushed but with something intact; our determination.

We did not give up! In 2014, Esteban was implanted on the left side, and I remember that day as the brightest one after the darkest moments. It was not just a successful surgery; it was the promise of a world that would finally open its doors to him through sound. The subsequent rehabilitation was constant, and we learned to celebrate advances that might seem small to others, but for us, were monumental, such as detecting sounds, turning when he heard his name, recognizing voices, feeling music as a vibration of the world and not just of the heart.

However, the journey was shaken again in 2018, four years after Esteban was implanted; the processor stopped working, and we had to undergo a new surgery to replace it. It was a time of anguish and fear; it was not just returning to the operating room but holding onto hope with trembling hands. Nevertheless, we pressed on because we understood something essential: although Esteban's language development has been slow, his ability to hear, simply to hear, means so much more than any perfection in speech.

But there is something even greater than his access to hearing, his spirit. Esteban is a young man who never gives up, never feels bad for not being able to express himself like others. On the contrary, he seeks means, invents paths, and finds ways to express himself. If he cannot say something one way, he tries another. If he cannot pronounce it perfectly, he communicates with his body, with signs, with gestures, with creativity, with persistence. He not only learned to hear sounds; he learned to make himself heard.

He is an excellent son, a student, and a spectacular human being, dedicated and committed to everything he undertakes. He is a chess player, swimmer, and baker; his chocolate cake and cookies have sweetened more hearts than speeches ever could. He is brave, a traveler, and always curious about the world. He has even traveled alone on a couple of occasions, something that was a tremendous act of faith for us; seeing him cross airports without fear made us understand that hearing disability was never a limit to his independence, just a reminder that he needed more tools and fewer prejudices.

He is also a gamer, a lover of games, and above all, a passionate football player; his greatest passion is to dream it, play it, live it, and feel it. On the field, he does not need translation; he communicates with strategy, movement, teamwork, and silent leadership that is understood without words. He is an athlete, a teammate, and a worthy rival. He has participated in tournaments, celebrated goals, cried over defeats, and has always risen with more strength.

Guatemala did not have, and still does not fully have, accessible processes in the public system for cochlear implants, so we had to build part of the path ourselves.

If I could give advice to another parent or guardian, it would be this: do not measure your children by the speed of their development; measure them by the strength of their spirit. Do not compare, do not give up, and do not isolate yourselves. Seek a tribe, seek information, demand what is necessary, celebrate the small victories, and defend the essentials. Hearing is not just sound: it is access, it is the world, it is opportunity.



Today, Esteban's greatest achievement is not speaking quickly; it is advancing without stopping. It is not pronouncing perfectly; it is communicating with courage. It is not about fitting into the world; it is changing it with his example.

Our story is not perfect, but it is real. And if sharing it lights a spark or opens a door for other families, then every hour of effort will have been worth it; not once, but every time. None of what we have achieved would have been possible without God above all things, and without our family, who have been our engine, our refuge, and our strength at every step of the way.