

COLOMBIA

Caregiver Name: Islena
Age at Implantation: 18 months

Child: Laura Vanessa
Age Today: 21 years

I am Islena, the caregiving mother of Laura Vanessa, a young woman who lost her hearing at 18 months of age.

Laura Vanessa is a 21-year-old young woman who was born prematurely at six months of gestation. During my pregnancy, I was undergoing treatment for uterine cancer, which required extremely delicate medical decisions focused on preserving life. Laura was born with hearing; however, for reasons that remain unclear (possibly related to her extreme prematurity), she gradually lost hearing in both ears.

At 18 months old, Laura was diagnosed with bilateral hearing loss. As a result, she was scheduled for cochlear implantation. On May 18, 2005, she received her implant and began a comprehensive rehabilitation process.

From the moment my daughter was implanted, a new challenge began for me as a mother: learning how to support her and how to face her inclusion within the family, society, and the educational system. This journey has not been easy, especially because I never had a strong family support network. I had to completely rethink my life, and this involved leaving my job in order to dedicate myself fully to her rehabilitation and inclusion.

One of the greatest challenges has been confronting attitudinal and institutional barriers while constantly advocating for equality in every aspect of her life.

My greatest support has always been my older children and, at one time, my mother. They have been my encouragement to keep going. Their support inspired me to create a foundation, through which I now support parents of individuals with all types of disabilities.

I live happily with my daughter and am grateful to God for blessing her with intelligence and strength. These qualities have allowed her to become independent from a very young age. Since the age of six, Laura has taken responsibility for her cochlear implant and processor, always attentive to their care and functionality, guided by the specialists who support.

Laura is responsible, committed, and active. When time allows, she practices sports such as soccer and swimming. **One of her greatest achievements, after many struggles, is her strong independence.** She actively seeks support networks that help her resolve educational challenges. Today, she is in her fourth semester of Mechatronics Engineering, is studying English at Level 7, and participates in workshops that strengthen her professional development.

Through everything we have experienced as a family, and through the work I do at my foundation, where we have a Listening and Support Centre that provides guidance not only to parents of children with hearing loss but also to families of individuals with other disabilities, I always encourage parents to first have faith in God, confidence in Him, and confidence in themselves.

It is essential to build trust in our children, to actively support their processes, to educate ourselves on these conditions, and to participate fully in family, social, and institutional spaces. Only then can we face the many difficulties encountered along this journey.

My message to parents of children and young people with hearing loss who use cochlear implants is this: support them, do not limit them. With love, help them become independent. Give them confidence. More important than the implant itself is helping them develop self-confidence and emotional security.

To help my daughter reach her goals, I had to make profound changes to my life project. I changed my role in every environment. **In her early years, I became her ears and her strongest advocate for her fundamental rights. I even changed cities in search of better opportunities for her development, changed friendships, distanced myself from family to avoid discrimination, and changed her school many times, until we finally found environments of adaptation, respect, and appreciation.**

Living with a disability is challenging, and being a woman with a disability presents even greater challenges. It requires fighting against stigma every day.