

Kyrgyzstan

Caregiver Name: Asel
Age at Implantation: 1

Child: Aida
Age Today: 9

My husband and I were only 23 years old when we learned about our daughter's diagnosis. We had married for love- the kind people describe as "forever". We were both hearing, young, and certain that only happiness was ahead. I was studying medicine at the time and during my pregnancy, I mentally reviewed dozens of possible complications. But hearing loss never crossed my mind. It felt distant, something that happened to other families, not ours.



Then came her birth. Her first cry. Tiny fingers, sleepless nights, and the overwhelming joy of becoming parents. Then the doubts began. There was silence when there should have been a reaction. More tests followed, then confirmation. A shock so strong it feels as though the ground disappears beneath your feet; you are standing yet inside you are falling. I remember walking out of the doctor's office. Life around us continued as usual; people talking, laughing, and cars passing by. But for us, it felt as though someone had switched the sound off. The irony was painful.

A new chapter began with cochlear implantation. We understood that time was critical. For a child, time means development and opportunity. **With charitable support, we were able to arrange the surgery. It was more than just assistance, it was hope.** The operation was successful. The first activation of implant is impossible to fully describe. It is not a dramatic movie moment, it is careful listening, adjustment and patience. It is the beginning of a long road built from small, determined steps.

With a child who has hearing loss, every day brings small victories. We celebrate what many parents take for granted: a new word, a clearly spoken sentence and a joke at the right moment. Sometimes we repeat things several times. Sometimes we realize we naturally speak more slowly and clearly than others. Progress comes quietly, but it does come.

Today, our daughter is in the second grade. She has friends and favourite subjects, such as art, robotics and science. She practices taekwondo and swimming. She has won medals for her forms in competitions. Inside me, I have two conflicting mothers: one proudly shouting "Bravo!", and the other whispering "Please be careful...the implant..."

At times, it feels as though we are raising not only a child, but also a delicate piece of technology that must always be kept safe. Still, we try not to let fear define her world. School brings challenges such as a teacher speaking while facing the board and classmates talking all at once. We encourage her to ask people to repeat themselves. We teach her to be resilient.

When Aida was seven, our second daughter was born. Soon after, she was also diagnosed with hearing loss. I will never forget the day we told Aida about her baby sister. She cried and said "I wanted her to hear". Her words pierced my heart. **In that moment, I realized she had been carrying her own struggles deeper than we understood.** She did not want the same path for her sister. Even with her strength and bright smile, parts

of her journey had been hard. That day I saw how much she had grown. There was no self-pity in her words, only love and a wish for her sister. Alongside the pain, I felt pride. Pride in her empathy and in her heart.

Each year brings new questions. Adolescence still lies ahead and sometimes I worry about what it might bring. But, alongside worry comes pride. Our daughter is growing into a strong, open-minded, determined young person. She laughs loudly and dreams without limits. As a family, we have learned to value both silence, sound and patience. We have learned to not compare our path with others. Our family has grown stronger through this journey.

If I could say one thing to parents who have just heard their child's diagnosis, it would be this; do not give up. In the beginning, it may feel as though everything is falling apart but it is not. Life is not ending, it is simply becoming different. You will become stronger than you imagined. Your child will look at you and believe in you. So, believe in your child, yourself and the road ahead. Even on the hardest days, try to find a reason to smile, because after every "this is hard", there comes a quiet and powerful "we did it".