Panama

Caregiver Name: Giovanna **Child: Christopher**
Age at Implantation: 3 **Age Today: 34**

“Is there anything we can do, doctor?” He answered, “No ma’am, I am sorry. There is nothing to do.” It has been 32 years, and still, I often wonder what would have happened if I had accepted those words as I walked out of the doctor’s office the day my son Chris was diagnosed as bilaterally profoundly deaf.

That morning had started like any other. I was working full-time and juggling responsibilities, so I arranged for Chris (1 year, 5 months) to be brought directly to the hospital for his ABR exam. This test was meant to confirm—or rule out—the suspicion of hearing loss that had been lingering for months. I arrived calm and trusting. Both his pediatrician and the ENT specialist had reassured me repeatedly: “Don’t worry.” Chris was a boy, and boys speak later, they said. Besides, he was growing up bilingual, in Spanish and English, which surely explained the delay.

The exam itself was long and emotionally draining. Getting a toddler to sleep under sedation took hours. When he finally did, he looked like a little angel. I remember thinking this would all be over soon, and we would return to our normal day—me to work, Chris back home. That illusion shattered when the doctor repeated the test and saw the same flat, non-responsive result.

"Ma'am, I’m sorry,” he said. “Your son is bilaterally profoundly deaf. Hearing loss can be mild, moderate, severe, or profound—and his is profound. There is nothing to do.”

The diagnosis was devastating. But almost instantly, something stronger took over: unshakable determination to make sure Chris would be a happy child; as I have usually described it, it I wanted this so bad it literally felt like having “fire in my guts.” At first, I didn’t even fully grasp what being deaf meant. I didn’t understand that it could affect speech. But very quickly, helping him hear and speak became my life’s mission.

At that time, in Panama, cochlear implants were virtually unknown. They were neither available nor discussed. Every door we knocked on—doctors, therapists, insurance companies, schools—led to the same answer: no. **No, we don’t do that. No, it’s not possible. No, it’s not allowed. Endless “no’s.” But I knew one thing with certainty: I was not going to accept “no” as the final answer.**

So, we widened our world. I travelled to Israel to attend an international congress on hearing loss. I sat in the front row, absorbing everything, asking questions, learning, and finally understanding what Chris needed: a cochlear implant. If Panama couldn’t offer it, then we would find a way elsewhere.

And we did. Chris was operated on in Colombia at 2 years and 11 months old, becoming the first patient there to be implanted with Mondini syndrome (absence of the cochlea). To make it happen, we brought

together a North American surgeon and a Colombian doctor, which at first seemed impossible due to country restrictions for medical practice with foreign professionals), but we didn't take no for an answer! What followed has been the never-ending task of educating family, neighbours, teachers, professionals, and even strangers who stared at Chris because of his implant. **Advocacy became part of our daily life, and it never really stopped.**

Today, Chris is 34 years old. The dream I had—to see him grow into a happy person—came true. He was fully mainstreamed, is bilingual, holds a degree in Marketing and Administration, works, and is happily married.

As for me, I now preside at an institution that works to promote early hearing screening and provide real solutions. Through this work, we have expanded our impact beyond Panama, collaborating with twelve allied countries across Latin America to share best practices, resources, and experiences in hearing health.

It has been 31 years since this extraordinary journey began. It has allowed me to encounter angels along the way and to turn around every NO into let´s make it happen. I truly believe the best is yet to come.