

The first time that I realized I was different was when I was in first grade. One of my classmates, pointing to the FM system I was wearing, asked me if I had a breathing problem. The FM system was a blue box strapped onto a stretchy navy belt, with a “flesh” colored wire that split into a Y shape, each end connecting to a large clear plastic piece that fit onto my hearing aids. I could see how the wires leading up my ears reminded my classmate of an oxygen tube. I was not upset at his comment,

but taken aback because for the first time, I was aware of how I was seen in someone else's eyes.

In spite of the fact that the "flesh" tone wires were supposed to be discreet, they stuck out on my six-year-old body, when I was decked out in fluorescent "Little Mermaid" gear. The FM system was obvious. It was clunky. It made me different.

After that one child made an innocent comment, I became self-conscious of what others thought of me because of the FM system

and my hearing loss. It was easy to do. People could see my hearing aids. Early 90's technology only provided huge hearing aids, made even more enormous on a child-sized head. When my hearing aids were behind my ear, they made my ears poke out of my stick-straight hair and I looked like an elf. In second grade I demanded a retake for my school picture when I realized I had forgotten to take off the FM system, and the beige wires were visible against my leftover summer tan. Seeing a

picture of myself with all of my “accessories” was jarring when compared with my mental image of who I was.

I also began to notice that people treated me differently. Teachers that I did not know somehow knew my name and would talk very loudly to me. Or they would speak very slowly to me and overly enunciate. I will never forget one teacher in particular who always spoke to me with her nose pressed up to mine. I can vividly recall exactly what her nose looked like.

It was uncomfortable that she spoke to me in that way. I was removed from my fourth grade math class because the teacher thought I would do better in a “small classroom environment” even though I had all A’s. It took me years to realize that because I have a hearing loss, I made that particular teacher uncomfortable.

I began to dread the first day of school, but not for the same reasons as every other child. I had to introduce myself to my new teacher with the FM system in hand, ensuring year after year

that their first impression of me was that I had a disability. I had my speech down pat: “Hi, I have a hearing impairment and wear hearing aids. At school, I have this FM system. It is a microphone that helps me hear you better. It’s all set up, all you have to do is wear it!” I tried desperately to sound cheery when I handed over the microphone, even though I knew that when they looked at me from that moment forward, they would think about my hearing. Once, when I had a substitute teacher in the classroom, I

gave him “the speech” and the FM system. He responded “Is this a joke?” After that, I did not give substitutes “the speech.” It did not seem worth it, and I could hear just fine with only my hearing aids.

The most difficult part of having a hearing loss for me was when my smarts were questioned. For whatever reason, there is a misconception that people with hearing difficulties are not as bright as “normal” people. I have always felt like I had to overcompensate

to prove that I am intelligent and get past that hurdle of the first impression. It can be exhausting. Certainly, when I am in the classroom, if I do not give one hundred percent of my attention to what is happening in front of me, it can cost me. But I know that is not because I am stupid. Classrooms are designed for auditory learners. I know that I am smart because I have learned to adapt and get good grades regardless.

Wearing hearing aids and having a hearing loss has, however, put me at a unique advantage. From a very young age, I have learned how to advocate for myself. When you have a disability, if you do not tell people how to help you, then they do not know how to help you. The reverse is true. Sometimes people think they are helping you and they are not, and you have to let them know. When you ask for something, it is not a question, but a demand. You are the only one who truly knows what you

need. I have had a lot of practice asserting myself and I am better for it.

Another advantage my hearing loss has given me is my perspective on differences. I did not choose to be different. I did not walk up to the vending machine of life and click the button for hearing loss. I did not choose my circumstances. The things that people can ignorantly judge, like the color of one's skin, religion, gender, sexuality, country of origin, or abilities -- these things are not chosen and as

such, are not reflective of character. I do not judge someone by how they look, because I know how that feels. I do not fall into the trap of stereotyping, because I know that many have stereotyped me. My hearing tells you nothing about who I am as a person. I frequently say that my hearing loss is one of the least interesting things about me. People who have pre-judged me and decided that I am just a person with a disability never get to know anything about me

beyond the surface. They don't get to know about the juicy stuff!

Frequently, I will hear people say to me "Oh, I keep forgetting about your hearing" and they feel guilty that they forgot. However, these are my favorite people and are usually my closest friends. When someone tells me they forgot about my hearing aids, I know that they see me for who I am. When they see me, they think of my talents, my anecdotes, or the time they called me in the middle of the night when

they needed help. Or maybe they are reminded of the time I tripped and fell flat on my face in the middle of a busy street while wearing a dress. I know the value in being seen as a full person, and not being defined by my limitations. My “difference” is not under my control. But the way I treat others is.