

“We’re changing lives—and that feels incredible!”

Grace O’Brien was just a teenager. But when she learned children in other countries might never hear the sound of music or laughter, she determined to make miracles happen!

Walking into The Lakeside School for Children with Special Needs in Jalisco, Mexico, 15-year-old Grace O’Brien’s whole body was trembling. She had no idea what to expect. But there, she found a dark-haired boy, his little arms wrapped around his mom’s legs.

“Hola,” Grace whispered, playing peekaboo, trying to get three-year-old Jesus’ attention. Yet he was so shy, he just kept staring at the floor.

Then an audiologist fit a solar-powered hearing aid over Jesus’ ear. And as he switched it on, Jesus’ eyes grew wide.

He looked up toward the door, at the clip-clop of footsteps in the hallway. He looked at the window, toward birds chirping. And then he looked at Grace—and giggled.

“Gracias!” his mom blurted, tears spilling down her cheeks.

At that, the Rancho Santa Margarita, California, high school student felt her own eyes well up with tears. And she knew, without a doubt, what a remarkable gift hearing truly is.

Grace’s mission

Growing up, Grace had always wanted to help others. “I want to go, too!” the then six-year-old pleaded with her parents when they planned to bring her two older sisters to a soup kitchen. And every holiday season, she’d wrap up toys for children in need.

But it was the summer she was 15 that changed Grace’s life.

Volunteering at a theater for children with hearing impairments, she was helping a little girl pronounce her lines—a difficult prospect because, even with her hearing aid, Alana was having such a hard time hearing the words clearly.

“I can’t do it!” Alana sobbed.

Her heart aching, Grace thought of her dad, who—after undergoing risky surgery for a brain tumor—was healthy again, but had suffered hearing loss. Often their family would be in a restaurant, and she could tell by the look on her dad’s face that he was only making out bits and pieces of the conversation.

If that embarrasses a smart, strong man like Dad, Grace could only imagine how hard it was for Alana.

“You can do it!” she encouraged Alana. And by the time of the performance, Alana was smiling confidently as she said her lines.

Seeing Alana’s newfound confidence, Grace wanted to do more. And, reading that there were countless hearing-impaired people in developing countries who couldn’t afford hearing aids, she began searching for a way to help. She discovered that even if they received donated hearing aids, the cost of replacing the batteries every few weeks could cost an entire month’s salary for a family in Haiti.

So when Grace learned about a new hearing aid called Solar Ear whose batteries could be recharged by the sun, she wrote to the inventor.

“A seed of gratitude can plant a giant miracle.”
—ANN VOSKAMP



“Seeing the smiles when kids hear for the first time is amazing,” says Grace, signing ‘I love you,’ with Jessinia.

Your product solves the biggest problem for hearing-impaired kids in impoverished countries. I want to help them. Could you help me?

To Grace’s surprise, he responded almost immediately—and offered a discount!

Inspired, Grace began telling everyone about her mission, spreading the word through Facebook and Twitter. She started a club at school, selling bracelets to raise money. Instead of birthday and Christmas presents, she asked for donations. And soon, she had enough for seven hearing aids!

“I couldn’t be more proud,” her dad marveled as she traveled to Mexico to deliver them. And Ears for Years (EarsForYears.org), Grace’s nonprofit, was born.

Sounds like... hope!

Now, after seeing what a difference a hearing aid had made for little Jesus, Grace knew she wanted to keep giving.

On her next trip, to Nicaragua, she met 16-year-old Jessinia.

“My parents kicked me out because they said I was stupid,” she told Grace via a translator. Hopeless and alone, living on the streets, Jessinia had just had a baby girl.

“But now I will be able to go to school and give my daughter a better life!” she beamed.

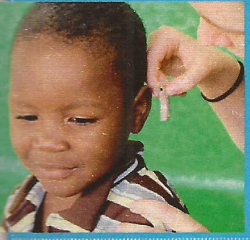
For one little boy in Haiti, a second chance to hear offered him a second chance at love.

“When his parents left him here, they called his hearing impairment a curse from God. But because of you, he’s no longer ‘unadoptable,’” the orphanage director told Grace.

Today, Grace—who started at Stanford University and has recently been awarded the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes—has brought the gift of sound to more than 200 children.

“I’ve learned you can accomplish anything you imagine, and I feel so honored to bring hope and hearing to these children,” Grace says. “We’re actually changing lives—and that’s incredible!”

—Kristin Higson-Hughes



Do you need a hearing aid? According to the Hearing Loss Association of America (HearingLoss.org), you may be experiencing hearing loss if you:

- ✓ Often cannot make out what others are saying in public places, like restaurants or the grocery store
- ✓ Sometimes think to yourself, “Why is that person mumbling?”
- ✓ Prefer not to have phone conversations, but instead communicate via e-mail or text
- ✓ Frequently ask your friends or family to turn up the radio or TV volume
- ✓ Sometimes need to be tapped on the shoulder to notice someone if you are not face-to-face
- Think you may need help? Call your health insurance provider or log on to www.ENTnet.org to find an otolaryngologist near you.

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