

EXPERIENCE—ELIZABETH VENGEN, HOPE, N.J. PROTECTING MY SON THROUGH PRAYER

Determined to protect her family, Elizabeth Vengen uses her Buddhist practice to help her son hear.

When I began practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism 16 years ago, I dreamed of having a happy family with lots of children. In this dream, however, I never imagined the kind of obstacles I would face and the human revolution that awaited me. Thankfully, I had nine years of the practice behind me when I became pregnant with my first child.

During my pregnancy, I chanted for a beautiful, intelligent, creative, artistic, athletic and happy baby who would become a capable person for kosen-rufu. I also introduced someone to the practice and helped her receive the Gohonzon. Fortunately, when Joseph was born, he was everything I had chanted for. As he grew, his great qualities became increasingly obvious. What also became obvious was that he was not saying "Mommy," which I longed to hear. By the time he was 15 months old, we confirmed what we feared: Joseph was born profoundly deaf in both ears.

Because of my strong practice, I only spent a few seconds asking "Why me?" and then determined to do what I could to help him. I resolved that, somehow, Joseph would hear 100 percent.

Shortly after, my husband and I learned about a miracle: the cochlear implant. We were told this could possibly provide some hearing to Joseph, but we would not know how much until after the implant surgery. We also learned the procedure would cost \$60,000 and might not be covered by insurance. But because we wanted Joseph to fulfill his potential in the hearing world, we quickly decided to have him evaluated for candidacy. Again, I turned to the Gohonzon and prayed that Joseph would receive the implant quickly (and not have to wear the required FM system for six months). I determined that insurance would provide complete coverage and, most importantly, that Joseph would hear 100 percent and make the best use of the implant they had ever seen.

To support me during this time, Andy and Lynn Rajeckas met with me every week to chant for Joseph. Every day, I read the letter from the Daishonin, "Reply to Kyo'o." Specifically, I focused on the passage "Kyo'o's misfortune will change into fortune. Muster your faith, and pray to this Gohonzon. Then what is there that cannot be achieved?" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 412).

Replacing Kyo'o's name with Joseph's name, I demanded that Nichiren Daishonin keep his promise and protect Joseph.

Within only three months of the initial diagnosis, Joseph was implanted at the young age of 18 months. At the time, he was one of the youngest children ever implanted. We also received complete insurance coverage, even for auditory verbal therapy for the next two years. The surgery was a total success. However, it was still too early to tell how well the implant would work and how much Joseph would actually hear.

For the next two years, Joseph plunged right into speech therapy and early intervention and my husband and I began training. I'd be lying if I said this wasn't the most stressful period of my life, especially since I was pregnant with baby No. 2, and it seemed that Joseph would never catch on to listening and speaking. So, I kept chanting and making as

many causes as I could with my fellow members.

One day, at a group meeting when Joseph was 2, he took an apple from the altar, brought it over to me and said “a’lle.” When he was 3, he sat down in front of the Gohonzon one day and chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with us for five minutes.

After this, Joseph continued to make great strides in his language development. With the aid of the implant, he tests between 25 and 40 decibels, which is normal conversational level. Outside of the testing situation, he hears even better. Without the implant, he couldn’t even hear at 120 decibels.

When Joseph was 4, his auditory verbal therapist told me he made the best auditory use of the implant she had ever seen. By 5, he started kindergarten at our local public school with his same-age hearing peers. Mid-year he reached major social and language milestones such as talking in complete sentences. At some point, he started saying “I love you” to me, but by then I was taking his speech for granted. He recently turned 6 and despite some initial doubts, he graduated from kindergarten on schedule.

It is now four-and-a-half years since he first heard anything and, despite all the obstacles, he is starting the first grade with his class this fall.

This road has not been easy for any of us, and Joseph has experienced levels of frustration that I will never understand. He still has many language gaps to fill in before first grade starts, yet slowly but surely, Joseph has become more and more capable of articulating his thoughts, feelings and ideas. It is beautiful to watch his personality emerge through what he says. As my mother says, every word he utters is a gift.

Throughout the past five years, I have always done my best to use the strategy of the Lotus Sutra to help Joseph reach and surpass every milestone. My many hours of desperate prayer for him have also helped me in doing my own human revolution. He constantly forces me to face my flaws as a human being and become the best mother I can.

My son is actual proof of my deepest prayers. He is beautiful, beyond intelligent, funny, gifted artistically, creative, athletic and capable, and he can hear. Most importantly, he is freer and happier than he has ever been. He is like a caged bird let loose to explore the expansive, limitless skies of his life. The qualities he has, together with his depth of character, have not only allowed him to face and overcome his obstacles but have also allowed me to realize my dreams and resolve any doubts about this practice. Beyond my own expectations, I am proud of Joseph and I am proud of this incredible victory for my entire family.