

Bright. Imaginative. Artistic. Slightly mischievous. Adjectives I use to describe my son, Christopher. Chris was born full term on July 29, 1991. I had attended prenatal classes, never missed an appointment with the obstetrician, never drank or smoked before or during pregnancy, and had never been given a reason to believe Chris would be born with a birth defect.

Immediately after Chris was born, I held him in my arms and, together with my husband, Ruben, we enjoyed a few moments of complete joy. Gazing at Chris through our tears, we didn't notice anything was amiss with our little baby. The obstetrics nurse took Chris across the room to weigh and clean him. Seconds later, she returned Chris to my arms and gently directed me to look at the left side of his head. "I need to show you this," she said softly. Ruben and I were stunned! Christopher's left ear did not form. There was no ear opening and no real ear to speak of. This couldn't be happening! I realize now it was a ludicrous response, but I reassured the nurse, "It will grow back. Don't worry, it will grow back."

An ear was missing. My son had no ear. I realized it wasn't a missing limb or a catastrophic illness. Nevertheless, a devastating situation for young parents. Our little baby. Our first born. The next few days I cried a lot. Not because of postpartum depression, but because my heart had broken. I watched as Chris became an object of interest to this large, teaching hospital. Permission was asked to photograph Chris and the site where an appendage was missing. Other parents and visitors walked by the nursery window and noticed the baby with the missing ear. What was most difficult to handle was hearing the comment over and over, "Oh, its only an ear. It could've been worse!" This comment always seem to come from parents who had healthy babies and children, or no children at all. We felt our feelings of sorrow, anger and guilt were never allowed to be validated.

As a registered nurse, I had seen up close, personal tragedies and severe illnesses. I was also given the opportunity many times to witness humanity at its best. People rising to face and conquer their personal sorrows. Ruben spent his days patrolling the inner-city streets of Cleveland as a police officer. He had encountered numerous people in dire situations who were less fortunate than ourselves. We knew life could be tough. The real question for us was, "How were we going to handle this?" We decided early on to focus on Christopher's gifts and strengths he brought to the world. We would help to make him a caring, sensitive, engaging individual.

Shortly after Chris was born, we were referred to Dr. James Arnold, pediatric otolaryngologist of

University Hospitals of Cleveland. Over the years, Dr. Arnold kept us abreast of new treatments and techniques used involving ear reconstruction. He had introduced us to other parents of children with the same birth defect, as well as introducing us to physicians who perform plastic surgery on children.

The latter was always a thought fearful to us. Plastic surgery. We just weren't sure. Dr. Arnold had given us the names of two specialists who were performing ear reconstruction in Cleveland. We were also given the name and phone number of a family who had agreed to allow us to "shadow" them through the ear reconstruction process of their child. In short, the procedure involved drilling holes in the base of the skull, using titanium. This is done after surgery is completed to remove any of the ear that may have formed before birth. Two threaded inserts are placed inside the skull where a wire is connected to hold and attach a prosthetic ear. This entire procedure occurs over months and months, keeping in mind the healing process of each step. We were skeptical, but willing to learn what we could.

Over time, to our absolute horror, the procedure, when completed, had literally maimed the child. We had a first-hand look of a devastated child and family. The procedures had caused pain, multiple infections, and permanent distortion. Our last conversation with the family revealed they were pursuing a lawsuit against the physicians. They were also looking at other surgical alternatives out-of-state. We would wait.

It was December, 2003. Chris was now in junior high school. Like most boys his age, he had become acutely aware of his looks, especially his face. As his parents, we constantly attempted to strike a balance between allowing Chris to indulge in self-pity because of his visible difference, but, on the other end of spectrum, making sure he understood that many, many people have huge, insurmountable problems who are far worse off. He needed to focus on who he was, what he brought to the world, and how he could make society a better place.

I returned home from work early last winter with the answering machine beeping. Upon listening to the first message, it was the excited voice of Dr. Arnold. He had information about a gentleman in Virginia who he thought could help Chris. Dr. Arnold had seen and read about Mr. Robert Barron. His work with prosthetics looked amazing. Dr. Arnold spent the first message giving us a short biography about Mr. Barron. The second message he left phone numbers, addresses, and a website. I wasted no time logging on the internet. What I saw astounded me! People like Chris with before and after photos, showing, with such clarity, perfect replicas of a person's missing ear! Upon reading the site, I was equally impressed with Mr. Barron's rationale against plastic surgery. Primarily, for the same reasons we had concluded to, after

witnessing the child's ear reconstruction mishap years earlier. When Chris and Ruben arrived home, they too, were ecstatic. We would call Mr. Barron.

It was 9:00a.m. the next morning when I put a nervous call to Mr. Barron. Mr. Barron answered the phone and introduced himself. I can not remember specifically what I said, but I do remember crying as I described this wonderful boy who needed an ear. Mr. Barron paused and simply said, "I can help your son." Well, that statement brought on more tears! He proceeded to explain the details, allowing me to interject with questions. At one point in the conversation, he asked, "Has Chris had any plastic surgery?" I could hear the intense relief in his voice when I told him "no." The necessary details were confirmed when Ruben and Chris arrived home. They would drive to Virginia in January for the first trip to give Mr. Barron an impression of Chris' right ear. Truly amazing. In February, Mr. Barron called to tell us the ear was almost ready. "Come on down so I can finish the last touches, matching the ear to Chris' skin tone."

This time, as a family, we drove to Virginia to witness Chris receive his left ear. Mr. Barron had been kind enough to accommodate our weekend schedule. Over the next two days, Mr. Barron instructed Ruben, Chris and I about the care and cleaning of the prosthetic. We toured his impressive office, asked questions and listened as Mr. Barron recounted endless stories of people who had been blessed to receive a prosthetic.

As a parent, it is difficult to articulate the joy you feel when you see your child's dream come true. No words can truly justify your feelings. So, you sit and cry instead. All the years of watching Chris look at his reflection and learn to come to terms with his difference had come to an end. Using a special adhesive, Mr. Barron attached Chris' new ear and handed him a mirror. Christopher smiled the rest of the afternoon!

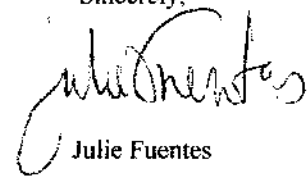
As we left Mr. Barron's office, we had not driven a mile when Chris whipped out the cell phone, making calls to relatives in Maine, Ohio and California, declaring, "I got my new ear..."

As I write this letter, it has been almost a year since Chris received his ear. He doesn't choose to wear it every day. It has become his choice. That is the beauty of it... he has a choice. There is a new-found self-confidence he displays. A more self-assured manner. In fact, he even ran for class president this year! Although the outcome was not in his favor, the bigger point was not lost to his parents. He had the

confidence to get in front of the entire student body and give a speech. A feat he dared not ever do before the prosthetic!

I recently asked Chris in casual conversation what he likes most about having two ears. He shrugged and replied, "I'm now just another face in the crowd, Mom." So very beautifully stated....

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julie Fuentes". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J".

Julie Fuentes