

Sounds of silence

*Robbed of her hearing as a child,
local teacher beats odds . . . and drums*

Published: Friday, December 19, 2008

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Heather High-Kennedy doesn't necessarily march to the beat of a different drummer. She is a different kind of drummer.

When the Lower Gwynedd resident was 12 years old, a junior high band director suggested that she take up art rather than try out for a spot as a drummer in the school band.

But she didn't listen to him for a number of reasons, not the least of which was, well ... she couldn't actually hear him. She was suffering the beginning stages of autoimmune inner ear disease (AIED) - a progressive



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Keith Valley Middle School seventh-grade teacher Heather High-Kennedy performs with Richie Cannata, a saxophonist who has played with Billy Joel, Elton John and the Beach Boys during a concert at the Horsham school Dec. 19.

hearing loss syndrome caused by antibodies or immune cells that attack the inner ear - and had rapidly begun to lose her hearing.

"The band director made me sing," said High-Kennedy, 35, now a seventh-grade teacher at Keith Valley Middle School in Horsham. "He started playing notes on the piano and said I couldn't match the pitches.

But I couldn't match the pitches when I could hear. I knew it had nothing to do with my hearing."

The experience, although initially more discouraging to her parents than to the youngster, didn't stop High-Kennedy from learning to play the drums, which would eventually become a major part of her life.

Now, after trying to live a normal existence for nearly 20 years in a virtually silent world, she has regained her hearing through a cochlear implant.

And as a treat for the students at Keith Valley Middle School, she picked up the sticks and played drums and percussion behind Richie Cannata, a saxophonist who has played with Billy Joel, Elton John and the Beach Boys, for two concerts at the school Dec. 19.

"I remember the band director standing there and saying, 'How can you expect to play music if you can't hear anything?'" said High-Kennedy when recalling the junior high incident. "That was the first time it ever hit me that something was different and that it was going to cause problems in some way. I was like, 'Wait a minute, I don't want to lose my hearing.' "



Saxophonist Richie Cannata talks about his career as a professional musician Dec. 19.

The Billy Joel connection would prove to be an important part of the journey, one that through years of twists and turns, explains how she eventually ended up on percussion and drums behind Cannata at a local middle school.

At the time she began losing her hearing, High-Kennedy was already a big Billy Joel fan. Her parents - of Springfield, Delaware County - decided to take her to a Joel concert at the Spectrum in Philadelphia back in the mid-1980s.

"I had never been to a concert," said High-Kennedy. "We didn't have a ton of money to go out and get tickets, but my parents

were afraid I'd be totally deaf by the time he came back again."

High-Kennedy had been playing the drums for about a year at that point - after having learned how to play the piano previously before being afflicted by AIED. The Joel concert seats were right behind the band, which gave the young would-be drummer an up-close opportunity to watch Joel's drummer, Liberty DeVitto, in action.

"It was just insane watching him play," said High-Kennedy. "He's just incredible. He's like Animal on 'The Muppets.' I said, 'I want to do that. That's what I want to play.'"

That drive led her to continue playing in the band throughout high school and then at West Chester University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English.

It was at West Chester where she met Sean Kennedy, a drummer himself.

"I was playing drums in the music hall and he walked by to see who it was, and it was a girl drummer," said High-Kennedy. "So he hung around afterwards and I started talking to him. He later asked my roommate, 'Who is that girl, what country is she from?' When my roommate told him I was from America, he said, 'America? Really? Because she doesn't understand English and has an accent.' He didn't know I was deaf."

The couple married in 1998 and a few years later, in 2002, Sean - a jazz musician who is the band director at Sandy Run Middle School in the Upper Dublin School District - upon hearing that Joel was coming back to Philadelphia for a concert, encouraged Heather to send an e-mail to her favorite drummer, Liberty DeVitto, telling him that he was the inspiration for her to become a drummer, "Even if I couldn't hear everything he was doing," she said.

She did write him, and to her surprise, DeVitto responded, saying he would love to meet her and arranged for two backstage passes to the upcoming Joel concert at the Wachovia Center.

"I was so excited," said High-Kennedy. "But I still wasn't convinced that it was going to work out. My heart was beating so fast. He was THE drummer. He was THE one."

The meeting came off without a hitch. Sean and Heather even got up on stage before the concert, courtesy of DeVitto, and had pictures taken with DeVitto and his drums.

The relationship has continued since then to the point that DeVitto and Sean have collaborated on a percussion book - an instructional guide for those who want to learn how to play drums - edited by Heather that is due out in May 2009. DeVitto also has performed in the past at both Keith Valley Middle School and Sandy Run Middle School and it is through this connection that Cannata, who performed last month at Sandy Run, performed at Keith Valley last week.

In 2004, after her three children were born, High-Kennedy decided to get the cochlear implant in her left ear.

"I was getting upset because I would turn around and the kids would be crying and I had no idea anything was wrong," she said. "I'd be home with them and would stay awake for the longest time because I was afraid to go to sleep and let something happen."

With the implant, she now has what is considered normal hearing, and is just like every other seventh-grade English teacher.

"Everything as far as hearing speech is great and everything falls within the normal range," she said. "But music is the one thing I'd say is not better. If you put on a Billy Joel CD now, I wouldn't know it. It's just noise. A cochlear implant is a great thing and I would never tell anyone not to get it. It's just not a natural sound."

Unnatural sound or not, High-Kennedy was pleased with her performance backing Cannata for the Keith Valley assemblies. She said afterward when it comes to music, it still sounds like noise. But she didn't appear to miss a beat, keying on the bass guitar, which she said she could hear, and by visually observing the movements of Cannata and the other musicians.

"She's just as good as any musician I've ever played with," said Cannata of High-Kennedy after the performances. "She really feels it."



High-Kennedy began losing her hearing when she was 12 years old. Her junior high band director suggested she take art classes instead of taking up drums.

