

Losing Sound, Finding Connection

By Robin L.

With today's technology, when you want to reach someone, what's the first method that comes to mind? Sending a text message is probably your answer. For older generations, making a phone call may be more practical. Unfortunately, neither of these options works well for my grandpa, who lost his hearing due to old age and was not a candidate for a cochlear implant.

For a long time, daily life seemed largely unchanged. The most noticeable difference was the volume of his television - it would be turned up so loud that we could hear it from outside his front door. Aside from that, he lived independently, much like any other senior living alone.



It wasn't until last year that we faced our first significant challenge as a family navigating hearing loss. One morning, my grandpa went out to buy groceries but forgot to bring his keys. He also didn't have his phone with him, nor did he know how to get to a nearby police station for help. Late that night, he was found wandering the streets. A kind stranger approached him and tried to help, but she couldn't understand his accent and mistook him for someone with dementia. An ambulance was called, and he was taken to the hospital for a check-up.

We were incredibly grateful for her kindness. At the same time, the situation left us with a lingering sense of unease. Nothing about

what happened was a medical emergency, yet it escalated into one, simply because he could not communicate. That moment forced us to confront a difficult question: how do you support someone who cannot rely on the very tools modern society depends on?

For many of us, a smartphone is a safety net. It allows us to call for help, send messages, share our location, and stay connected. But for my grandpa, these systems might as well not exist. He does not use a smartphone, cannot text, and struggles to communicate with strangers due to his hearing loss and strong accent. In that sense, his world is fundamentally different from ours.

After that incident, we began to notice changes in him. He became quieter, more withdrawn, and spent most of his time indoors. Sitting on the couch, watching muted television, eating the same frozen meals delivered to his doorstep. We missed the old version of him: the grandpa who loved giving long lectures about everything, who enjoyed exploring beaches, and who proudly cooked his famous homemade lasagna.



We realised that meaningful communication would only be possible if we adapted to his needs, giving him the chance to reconnect with the world around him.

We became more mindful of facing him directly when speaking, ensuring he could see our facial expressions and lip movements. We slowed down, used simpler phrasing, and reduced background noise during conversations. Instead of repeating the same sentence louder, we learned to rephrase it.

After watching *The Way We Talked*, a film about a cochlear implant user who reconnects with the Deaf community, we were inspired to introduce simple sign language into our home. At first, Grandpa was hesitant. Learning something new at his age felt intimidating.



Instead of pushing him, we started small. We began learning basic signs ourselves and used them consistently around him, even when he wasn't directly involved in the conversation. Over time, curiosity replaced resistance. He began asking questions, trying out signs, and slowly participating again, so we taught him a few words each day. Three months later, he can now confidently sign simple, everyday words, especially around food and daily routines. More importantly, he is engaged again! He is no longer just observing life from the sidelines.

Supporting someone with hearing loss is not about a single solution. It is about a combination of awareness, adaptation, and empathy. It means recognising early signs of

withdrawal and responding before isolation deepens. It means creating an environment where communication is accessible - whether that's through clearer speech, visual cues, or alternative methods like sign language. It also means preserving dignity, allowing the person to feel included rather than "helped." Most importantly, it means showing up consistently.

Hearing loss is often an invisible condition. Because it is not immediately noticeable, people experiencing it can easily become isolated, sometimes choosing silence over the fear of inconveniencing others. Communication can become exhausting, frustrating, or even embarrassing. Without the right support, silence can gradually replace connection. Our experience taught us that families play a primary role in preventing that isolation. By making small, intentional changes step by step, we can help ensure that hearing loss does not become social loss.

For our family, what began as a challenge became an opportunity: not just to support Grandpa, but to rethink what communication truly means. It is not just about hearing words. It is about making sure the people we love still feel heard.

