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'Hear Me Roar' event to raise money, awareness of cochlear implants

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Sarah Ball interacts with the lemurs at the Creation Kingdom Zoo. Contributed photo.

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GATE CITY — After finding out their daughter was deaf and then going through the process to get cochlear implants, one local family decided to start a nonprofit organization to help raise awareness about the implants.

The organization, called Waiting to Hear, will hold a fundraiser at 7 p.m. on Aug. 8 at Creation Kingdom Zoo in Gate City.

Shannon Ball said he and his wife suspected there might be a problem because at around 18 months their daughter's vocabulary was still very limited. They took little Sarah to the doctor and were told it could be a number of things, from speech problems to autism.

"We knew something wasn't right, but nothing they were telling us really felt right either," said Shannon.

Shannon said he came home from work one day and Sarah was sitting with her back to the door. She was staring into the kitchen and didn't seem to notice him.

He called out to her but got no response. After a few times of trying to get her attention without success, he shut the door. The vibration from the closed door caused her to turn around.

"That's when it hit me that something was definitely wrong," he said.

It was at that point the family went to see an audiologist and received the news that Sarah was deaf.

While they were at the doctor, they received information about cochlear implants and the family decided getting implants was the way they wanted to go.

A cochlear implant is a small, complex electronic device that can

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help to provide a sense of sound to a person who is profoundly deaf or severely hard of hearing.

The process to get the implants took a while, but the Balls met another family who had previously gone through the process and helped guide them through every step.

Waiting to Hear was established, in part, to help other families the way they were helped and, in part, to raise awareness about cochlear implants.

While researching cochlear implants, Shannon learned of some troubling statistics — only five percent of deaf children are told about the implants.

“So many kids fall through the cracks,” Shannon said. “We decided we were going to try to do something to fix that. That’s when Waiting to Hear was born.”

The Balls learned there was a zoo in Gate City, and because Sarah loves animals, the family started making regular visits to Creation Kingdom. One day, while at the zoo after Sarah had her implants, Shannon said Sarah stopped and pointed up, making the sign for bird.

“At that point, we knew we had done the right thing and that this was going to be an amazing ride for us,” he said.

When a patient receives cochlear implants, getting used to the sound can take a while. It was no different for Sarah, but it had finally happened — she heard the birds.

Today, Sarah, who will turn 5 this month, is doing great, Shannon said.

“She is getting ready to enter Pre-K this year and is actually going to enter a mainstream class. We’re really happy about that,” he said.

The goal of the Hear Me Roar event at Creation Kingdom Zoo will help raise awareness about cochlear implants and help to fund projects that support a hearing and spoken language outcome for deaf children in the region.

Attendees will have the opportunity to see Creation Kingdom’s nocturnal residents come alive after closing time. There will be additional storybook and cartoon characters roaming the zoo for photo opportunities with smaller children and a chance to win



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tickets to some of the area's most popular tourist attractions, such as Carowinds Amusement Park, Hollywood Wax Museum and Wonderworks.

The cost for the event is \$10 per person and free for children 2 and younger.

Sponsors for this year's event include Creation Kingdom Zoo, Wellmont Health System, Cochlear Americas and Dollywood.

For more information on Waiting to Hear, a 501(c)3 nonprofit based in the Tri-Cities, contact Shannon Ball at (276) 494-4138 or Shannon.Ball@WaitingToHear.org.

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