

Grace O'Brien

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The Sweet Sound of Helping Others

Middle-schooler Grace O'Brien of Rancho Santa Margarita witnessed her father fight a brain tumor, causing him severe hearing loss. Now, just three years later, this extraordinary young woman is on a mission to help struggling children. She travels to poverty-stricken communities in Honduras, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Haiti and Nicaragua; fitting young people facing severe hearing loss with solar powered hearing aids. Grace created non-profit organization 'Ears for Years' and has personally changed the lives of hundreds of little ones around the world.

Her parents planted the seeds of her passion for community service early on in her youth. They would take the whole family down to a local shelter and serve meals to the homeless when Grace was just five years old. She says she also learned the importance of volunteering as a Daisy in the Girl Scouts. "I've always been volunteer -driven from a young age".

At 15 years old and motivated by her father's illness, Grace found a theater camp for deaf children in Culver City and volunteered daily for eight hours throughout the summer. She taught these kids how to communicate, build social skills and experience theatrical performance (a favorite hobby of hers). Many of the campers had recently received hearing aids or cochlear implants. Grace was deeply impacted by her experience working with these children, "I saw how much they really grew and I wanted to help kids in other places that had similar issues."

She went online and researched hearing loss and came upon some shocking statistics. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that there are 278 million people with hearing loss in the world. The majority would benefit from hearing aids but cannot afford them. It was a pivotal moment for Grace that gave her the desire to help underprivileged children, "I realized that it is an essential tool to help them learn and communicate with their peers. I saw a problem and I wanted to solve it." In the midst of researching whether or not she could reuse old hearing aids or buy new ones for needy children, Grace stumbled upon a company called Solar Ear, based in Brazil. The hearing aids can be powered by any light source. One of the main problems with regular hearing aids is that the batteries have to be changed every few weeks. Batteries cost \$1-2 dollars each, which for many people in developing countries constitutes their entire salary.

The teenaged dynamo negotiated with Solar Ears for a discounted price of just \$100 for a solar powered hearing aid kit, which includes the hearing aid, a solar charger, and four rechargeable batteries. She purchased eight of them with her Christmas money and shipped them off to a school for the deaf in Mexico. She raised money to fly to Mexico and help an audiologist test and fit needy with the aids. Moved by the tears of joy parents shed when they spoke to their children and were heard for the first time, she became hooked and came home from that trip determined to create a non-profit organization.

In 2012 'Ears for Years' was born. Grace raised awareness through social media and built a website. She focuses on serving kids between the ages of 2-10 years. "I've always tried to fit younger kids with hearing aids because the younger you are, the greater the impact. You can use that to build a solid foundation to escape poverty. Statistically speaking, this group benefits the most from it."

Grace has been honored by the Points of Light Foundation and recently won the prestigious Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes 2015. "I was really overwhelmed at first when I was getting acknowledged. I didn't know if I deserved it. I'd be with all of these people who had done these crazy, amazing things and just to be grouped with them was so incredible and such a blessing. I finally realized that maybe I did have the potential to change the world one hearing aid at a time."

You can find out more information on Ears for Year and ways to contribute at: www.earsforyears.org
