

Echoes of Silence

After the birth of their first deaf daughter, never in a million years would the Hall family expect another deaf child, much less twins

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

While driving home from an audiologist appointment in October 1988, Kelly Hall gazed at her daughter in the back seat. Kayla was perfect — curious blue eyes, curly blond hair, bubbly attitude.

“Her perfection shouted out that the doctor was wrong,” Kelly said. “There was nothing imperfect about this child.”

But there was.

Being a licensed physical therapist, Kelly sensed something was wrong. Her 12-month-old daughter wasn't obedient. She wouldn't come when called. Kelly would have to touch her hand to take it away from something.

“I just thought she was so involved in play she wasn't paying attention,” Kelly said.

Her husband, then-Capt. Lee Hall, thought his daughter

had fluid in her ear. While in Tokyo on his way home for leave from Kunsan Air Base, South Korea, he called his wife for the latest update.

“When I was told she was deaf, I couldn't imagine that. There was no history of deafness in our family,” he said.

For the F-16 fighter pilot, it was a long flight home. “I felt an extreme sense of loss. Our experience with deafness was deaf people handing out pencils at airports. Would she ever date? Would she ever have a job? I thought of all these awful things.”

“I felt heartache and grief,” Kelly said. “I fell to the floor and asked God, ‘Why?’ I prayed for 45 minutes and realized this was not a mistake, that Kayla was a gift of love and hope for the future. It was strange to be heartbroken and hopeful at the same time,” Kelly said.

After the initial shock, they began learning about deafness and how to help their daughter. They discovered that deafness wasn't an “easy” handicap. They were told repeatedly that most deaf adults read at a fourth-grade level, and that until Kayla developed a language she would have a difficult time thinking abstractly.

They fitted Kayla with hearing aids, after some financial help from the Air Force, and enrolled her in a school for the deaf where she learned sign language. They enrolled in what was then called the Exceptional Family Member Program [See “Where to Turn for Help,” Page 36] and learned about other points of contact for researching deafness. Although they liked the school, they realized they weren't satisfied with Kayla probably never learning to talk.

Sign language alone wouldn't be enough. So, they took her to Listen Inc. in Tempe, Ariz., with hopes Kayla could learn to speak. Although it wouldn't be easy, it was possible. Better yet, the therapy and hearing aids were paid by the Program for Persons with Disabilities, a financial assistance program for active duty military with family members with severe physical disabilities.

Enjoying a game of Tripoly, the Hall family spends quality family time in their on-base home at Hill Air Force Base, Utah. Col. Lee Hall, 388th Operations Group commander, and his wife, Kelly, have three hearing impaired girls — Megan (from left), Kayla and Jenna — and a son, David. Last year marked the first time the twins, Megan and Jenna, attended a public school.



**Where to
turn for
help**

For more information about the Special Needs Identification and Assignment Coordination process, visit www.efmconnections.org. This month, the Program for Persons with Disabilities will change to ECHO, the Extended Health Care Option. To enroll, active duty military families must first be in the SNIAC. For more information, contact the nearest military treatment facility health benefits advisor, or go to www.afspecialneeds.org.

Three years after Kayla's birth, Kelly was pregnant with a son. They wondered if he, too, would be deaf, so they were tested and learned they both likely had a recessive "deafness gene." There was a one in four chance with each pregnancy their child may be deaf.

David Hall was born on June 27, 1990, and he could hear normally. After his birth, David's parents resolved not to have more children. A girl and boy were enough.

Miracle conception

"We couldn't imagine God would give us more deaf children," said the father of two, who by now was in F-16 Fighter Weapons School at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.

Despite their efforts to prevent another pregnancy, Kelly got pregnant, and in November 1992 she gave birth to Megan and Jenna, identical twins born identically deaf. The parents called it a "miracle conception."

"I was floored," Kelly said. "I didn't think I could ever be the mother my children needed me to be. My oldest daughter's speech was still undistinguishable, my son was two and now I had deaf twins."

The parents had learned from their experiences with Kayla that the sooner hearing aids were made, the quicker the twins would hear sounds and learn to speak.

"The Air Force was great in that the twins were tested when they were less than two weeks old, and in two months they had hearing aids," said the father of four. Kelly heard that a lab technician asked if the hearing aids were for dolls because they were so tiny.

By now, the parents were informed that Kayla was a perfect candidate for a cochlear implant [See "Giving Life a Jumpstart," May 2003]. In September 1994, Kayla received a \$25,000 implant, again paid by the Program for Persons with Disabilities.

Meanwhile, Kayla's father was moving up in rank. In 1994, he was a major and selected to attend the Marine Corps Command and Staff College in Quantico, Va. However, he discovered the Quantico area wasn't well equipped to work with cochlear implant children. The best school for Kayla was the Central Institute for the Deaf in St. Louis, Mo., and there was an Army staff college in Kansas. After he contacted a few fighter pilots selected to attend the Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth — who agreed to switch schools with him — he asked the Air Force Personnel Center for permission to attend the staff college at Leavenworth. It would be best for him and his family. Headquarters officials agreed and allowed him to swap schools with another pilot. While there, he drove home every weekend — 300 miles each way.

The next year, the 2-year-old twins received implants. The Program for Persons with Disabilities not only bought the implants, but also paid for tuition fees at the Central Institute for the Deaf.

The fighter pilot sacrifice

In 1995, the major and his family were reassigned to Hill Air Force Base, Utah. Again, they looked at the location and decided there was an adequate deaf school nearby. Rather than split the family so the girls could remain in the institute, they moved to Hill as a family. In April 1997, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel. But during their third year at Hill, they knew they needed to take the twins back to the school in St. Louis.

"Kayla was doing OK, but the twins desperately needed to get back to St. Louis," he said. Since he hadn't been in the service long enough to retire, he volunteered to go anywhere in the world — even remote again to South Korea — so his family could relocate to St. Louis while he endured another remote assignment. But nothing worked.

Then he was asked if he, a fighter pilot, would be willing to move to Scott Air Force Base, Ill., to Air Mobility Command, which has no fighter aircraft.

"That was unbelievable. I figured that as a fighter pilot, that would be a career ender," he said. He didn't think he had a chance of making colonel.

Throughout his life, the F-16 pilot thought the Air Force was his calling. It's what he was put on earth to do. He figured if staying in meant having to swallow his pride and accept a job certain to end his career, so be it.

"It made me feel loved that he would make such a sacrifice for us," Kelly said. "It made me feel like we were part of a team. I didn't realize how much it hurt him because he kept a lot of his feelings inside. He didn't tell me because he knew it would hurt us."

He went from commanding a fighter squadron to developing policy on a mobility command staff.

"It was OK because I was doing it for the right reasons — to take care of our kids. But it was very difficult. I felt like a fish out of water," he said.

A big factor for accepting the assignment was so the twins could attend Moog Center for Deaf Education in St. Louis. To his surprise, he enjoyed his job and provided a different view for the mobility world with his fighter cockpit insights.

To hopefully dispel misconceptions members of a colonel selection board may have about him, he wrote a letter to the board president, explaining his motives:

"Just as we were ready to throw in the towel, my wing

commander proposed a solution," he wrote. "I could go to Scott and learn the mobility business, while my girls availed themselves to the world's best deaf education. Our oldest daughter was already 'main-streamed' into a regular hearing classroom, and our seven-year-old twins are not far behind. Though I took a major detour off the traditional fighter pilot career path ... I view my time in AMC as a bonus. My overwhelming desire, now that my family is ready, is to once again command."

He did so well in Air Mobility Command he was promoted to colonel below the zone in December 1998.

Excruciating moves

By now, the Halls had racked up a lot of moves, each one excruciating for Kelly. "Whenever we moved into a new neighborhood, I felt we were the freak factor," she said. "We had twins and three deaf children. There wasn't much unkindness, but people would have questions. I would have to educate them each time."

With each move, the parents had to rebuild their support system, find a school that met their girls' needs, and enlighten teachers about deaf students.

In May 2002, the twins graduated from the Moog Center, ending the family's need for specialized deaf education. With assistance, they could attend public schools. They were now "main-streamed."

After a year apart from their father while he attended Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., the family is back together at Hill. Kelly said all is good with the Hall family. "We're living in victory right now," she said. "It fills me with such joy to see my girls' friends come over, and they have no problem communicating with them. It took me seven-and-a-half years to have a complete conversation with Kayla.

"When I look back, I see how far we've come," she said. "Instead of special kids' needs, I have regular kids' needs — them not wanting to do their homework, not going to bed and teenage chaotic stuff. We now have normal family problems."

As inspiration to others, Kelly shares her family's story at weekend retreats, seminars, Bible studies and Christian military gatherings.

"The Air Force allowed us to continue to have a career and take care of our children," Colonel Hall said. "We're very grateful. For others like us, my advice is to work with the system. I never asked for special treatment."

The Halls are no longer enrolled in the Special Needs Identification and Assignment Coordination process — formerly the Exceptional Family Member Program — and the colonel is once again eligible to be stationed



Receiving a little help from their father, Jenna (left) and Megan make the most of a shade-covered tree swing on a warm summer's day. As a lieutenant colonel, Colonel Hall didn't think he'd make rank when he was forced to pick between staying in the fighter pilot world and developing mobility policies at a base where his daughters could get the best treatment available for their deafness. But things worked out for him and his daughters after he accepted a position in Air Mobility Command.

anywhere in the world. This month, the Halls will move to Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, where the colonel will be the director of assignments for the Air Force Personnel Center. Instead of working with the system, he'll be responsible for the entire assignment system.

"It'll be my job to ensure we allow people to take care of their kids while they serve their country. It's full circle," he said. ☺