

Source Unknown

12-year-old wants chance to hear again

by Wanda Combs
Editor

Kayla McAlexander lives and breaths basketball. When she is on the court, a couple of teammates use sign language to tell her about the plays, and Kayla can hear just enough to detect the sound of the buzzer and whistle. Soon she will be able to do much more.

Next week Kayla will go to the University of Virginia Hospital, where she

will receive a cochlear implant. With the device, she is expected to regain part of the hearing she lost to meningitis when she was two years old.

The implant has external and internal parts. An outside microphone picks up See 12-YEAR-OLD WANTS, Page 2A

Wanda McAlexander with her children (from left) Kayla, Ashlee and Joshua sit in the family's living room.

Press Photo - Combs

12-year-old wants-

(Starts on Front Page)

sounds, sent by FM signals to the implant beneath the skin. Wires carry the signals to inner ear fibers, which relay electric sound information to the brain.

The procedure will only be done for one of Kayla's ears, but it will make a dramatic difference. Mother Wanda said the doctor's goal is to have Kayla talking on the telephone within a year.

The implant surgery, which is done on an outpatient basis, takes four hours. Dr. John Mason will perform the procedure. Wanda explained five weeks of recovery time will follow while the scar behind Kayla's ear heals. Kayla will then return for the external unit. From that point on, Kayla, the doctors, her parents and the staff at the schools she attends, Woodrow Wilson in Roanoke, will be working together as a team on Kayla's speech.

The procedure requires a tremendous commitment from all concerned. Much therapy is required. Kayla will have to relearn how to listen. Wanda said the doctor compared what implant patients must do to someone who is resuming to ride a bicycle after years of not doing so. "The brain never forgets. You just relearn... Kayla has to relearn how to listen, but her brain hasn't forgotten how." She has continued to communicate by speaking as well as signing through the years.

Wanda and husband Steve will be traveling with Kayla to Charlottesville, where her doctor will tune the implant to the right frequency.

Kayla is a good candidate for the implant, doctors have told the McAlexanders. The tests that have been done indicate she has no nerve damage. "A lot of times with meningitis that happens," Wanda said. "Her ears were perfectly clear."

When Kayla had meningitis, she stayed in the hospital for 14 days. The disease, characterized by a high fever and flu-like symptoms, took its toll. Two months afterward, Kayla was tested and found to have lost hearing in both of her ears.

She is one of three McAlexander children. She has a brother Joshua, 9, and sister Ashlee, 13.

Kayla started talking about an implant after one of her friends at church got one several years ago. Three children at Woodrow Wilson also have the implant.

The McAlexanders actually found out about the procedure after Kayla lost her hearing, and Kayla was tested when she was three years old. But, Wanda said, "we felt like it had to be her decision."

The implant surgery is expensive, approximately \$60,000, and the McAlexanders expect their insurance to pay a portion of it. Friends have placed donation jars in local stores. Wanda said she checked the jars after only one week and \$150 had been given.

Nicole Hylton, Kayla's babysitter for several years, is also organizing an Adult Basketball Benefit Tournament to help with expenses. The tournament has been scheduled for June 1-2 at Floyd County High School. The cost is \$100 per team (seven-member teams). Deadline to register is May 29. Call 745-4394 for information, or mail fee, names of team and players, a phone number and the name of a contact person to Hylton at 1198 Barberry Road, Floyd, VA 24091. A special account has set up for Kayla at The Bank of Floyd, 101 Jacksonville Street, Floyd, VA 24091.

