

If you were blind, what would it feel like to regain your sight? Or to hear the birds after years of deafness? Or to play golf when you thought you'd never walk again? Just ask Stuart Kerry, Faye Yarroll or Gary Riley, who have all reclaimed a missing part of their world. By Claire Buckis.

Some kind of miracle

"Use your eyes as if tomorrow you would be stricken blind. Hear the music of voices, the song of the bird, the mighty strains of an orchestra, as if you would be stricken deaf tomorrow. Touch each object you want to touch as if tomorrow your tactile sense would fail. Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if tomorrow you could never smell and taste again. Make the most of every sense; glory in all the facets of pleasure and beauty which the world reveals to you." – Helen Keller, "Three Days To See", Atlantic Monthly, 1933

A different tune

When Faye Yarroll got her hearing back last year, nothing could have prepared her for the startling orchestra of domestic noises she would experience. "I went and flushed the toilet," she says, "and I thought, 'What was that?' Deafening!"

The 47-year-old service-desk operations manager had prepared herself for hearing traffic noises, birds, music and speech but not the whole world of ordinary, everyday sounds she now discovered within her house. "I went to do the dishes and I filled up the kitchen sink with water. The water was so noisy; it was like Niagara Falls. I'd never heard it before. I didn't even know it made noise."

Yarroll was born with sensorineural hearing loss, a hereditary condition that damages the hair cells of the inner ear. Hearing aids allowed her to hear the basics of speech but she missed out on the subtler sounds, such as the rise and fall of musical notes or the hum of a washing machine. "There are so many sounds that other people take for granted but I didn't even know what they were," she says. "I never had an appreciation for music because I couldn't understand it. If I was out with a group having a conversation, I couldn't hear about 80 per cent of what was being said. So I missed out on a lot."

When Yarroll was 25, a skiing accident left her completely deaf in her right ear. She was still able to communicate by lip reading, using hearing aids and

by concentrating strongly on the sounds she could hear. But in her 40s, a side effect from medication she was taking rapidly reduced the remaining hearing in her left ear.

"It was depressing. I hadn't had much hearing before that but it was all I had," she says. "It was affecting me most at work. I've got a lot of staff. People start to ignore you because you don't hear. Every day, you come home exhausted because you've got to strain to listen and you've got to lip read, you've got to observe."

She began to seriously contemplate giving up work altogether, until a woman working at the hearing-aid centre suggested she would be a good candidate for a cochlear implant. After passing a series of tests, Yarroll had the "bionic ear" implanted in her right ear in March last year.

She had to wait three weeks after the operation for the scar tissue to heal before she was ready to switch on the implant. "I had nothing to lose – I was already profoundly deaf," she says. The first person to speak to her was her brother, Robert. "He said, 'Well, what's it sound like?' And I said, 'Robbie the robot!' because it was very robotic-sounding to start with. Your brain has to learn how to process the new way of hearing and that takes time."

Yarroll was able to hear things she had never experienced before. "I had been waiting all my life to hear birds in the trees. So I went outside looking for them. All I'd wanted to hear were the birds. And I could hear them! Now there's a kookaburra outside my office, which I love to hear."

Gradually, the noise thresholds of her implants were increased to allow Yarroll to hear subtler sounds. "When people talk about the computer mouse, they say, 'One click' or 'Double click' but I didn't know that the mouse actually clicked, that it made a 'click' sound. There were other things – the indicators in the car. And buttering bread. It doesn't make much of a sound but it does make one."

Yarroll can turn off her implant any time she wants silence – a handy feature for sleeping. And the

implant automatically reduces the volume in noisy shopping centres and restaurants so she's never bombarded with noise. But Yarroll relishes all noises, even the annoying ones. "I would rather have that than not have anything."

She's retained some useful skills from being deaf, including excellent eyesight and lip reading. "If I'm on a bus or on public transport somewhere, I never get bored because I can watch everyone's conversations."

Her biggest regret is not getting the implants earlier. "I had to wait until someone suggested cochlear implants to me," she says. "I could have benefited from it a lot earlier. It's given me my hearing back, it's given me my confidence back, it's given me my life back."

One small step

In 1997, Gary Riley was told he would probably never walk again. But the business manager decided to renew his golf club membership anyway. "Living in hope," he says.

Riley, then 44, had just been promoted to state manager within a major oil company when a whitewater rafting accident – which was part of a company team-building exercise – kinked an artery in his neck and left him paralysed on his left side. "It was the same result as having a stroke," he says. "I couldn't walk, I couldn't swallow, the whole lot. The whole left side was affected."

At first Riley thought he would be back at work within a few months – until the father of three began to realise that his life had permanently changed. Even simple tasks such as walking and driving were going to take years of rehabilitation. For the first six months, he couldn't even roll over in his hospital bed. His memory and concentration were affected – he would get confused when family and friends came to visit because he couldn't remember when he had last seen them.

His wife, Eva, quit her job as a secretary to care for her husband. The couple went from living on two →