

I am honored to be considered for the Matthew C. Graziadei Scholarship. I hope Matthew's friends and family will see some of Matthew in me! I had planned to write a "traditional" paragraph, but instead would like to show you a little about me and why I deserve this award through the following reflection:

"James, I've asked you twice. Pick up these balls!"

Spoiler alert: I heard nothing.

After hitting 50 backhands in a row without missing during the fifth hour of tennis camp, I high-fived my teammates and walked toward the green, vinyl-coated fence. "James! Now, you're just being rude. For the last time, pick up these balls!" the new coach barked. With my back to him, I brought a 64-ounce jug to my mouth, ice-cold water spilling onto my chin, completely unaware he was speaking to me. "JAMES! What is wrong with you? Are you deaf or something?" I turned around just in time to read the word "deaf" on his lips. My lifelong friends burst into laughter, and so did I, realizing the irony of the coach's question. Yes, I am hard of hearing. Little did he know this difference is central to who I am.

That moment at tennis camp was just one instance when my deafness led to unanticipated humor and connection. Years before, as the only deaf student at the 2019 Scripps National Spelling Bee, my newfound friends treated me like a 12-year-old spell-ebrity as we ran through the halls of the Gaylord Convention Center during Bee Week. They accepted me wholeheartedly and marveled at the technology of my Phonak hearing aids and FM system. *Scripps News* filmed a short documentary about my journey with hearing loss that week, which turned out to be an unexpected turning point in my life. When the reporter asked how I had managed to overcome the challenges of profound single-sided deafness to qualify for the Bee, I could only mutter, "Hard work." Challenges? What challenges? My parents had never informed me of the obstacles predicted by doctors when I was just two days old. Ten times more likely to fail a grade? Trouble with reading and language? These ideas were foreign to me, as I had spent my early years diving into the world of books, never aware of any possible limitations. It had never crossed my mind that my disability could present a barrier to success. Recognizing my unique perspective, I left Washington, D.C., with a commitment to celebrate my deafness and to dismantle notions that deaf individuals are somehow less capable than their hearing counterparts.

Within weeks, I found myself on the carpeted floor of the Charlotte Regional Library, beginning the "hard work" of deaf advocacy, gluing pipe-cleaner whiskers onto a paper bag. My Pete the Cat puppet was a Saturday morning masterpiece for Evan, a four-year-old with bilateral hearing loss. Over the past five years, I have mentored many Evans and their parents, guiding them to resources and interventions that I received as a child. Early in my life, such support gave me a sense of limitless opportunity, which drives me to continue working with families today. From demonstrating accommodations and technology in public school systems to serving as a national parent support panelist for the Alexander Graham Bell Foundation, it is a privilege to have the opportunity to encourage and connect.

Last fall, I organized a screening of *Rally Caps*, a mainstream baseball movie that authentically portrays the hearing loss experience. I transformed our space into a cozy theater with soda, popcorn, and closed-captioning, inviting all of my Evans and their families. As we huddled on blankets, watching, I could not help but think back to that moment on the tennis courts. As the sun set on that scorching day of camp, I proudly pulled back my sweaty, reddish-blond curls to show off my Med-El cochlear implant to our new coach. I took the opportunity to explain that I embrace hearing loss and how it has shaped me. Deafness is a gift that motivates me to create lasting connections in my community. It is who I am. It is what I do. It is who I will be. I celebrate it, and I would not change it.

If chosen to receive this award, I will use the money to purchase a Phonak Roger Tabletop Microphone, a wireless microphone designed for people with hearing loss who attend and participate in meetings. This tabletop microphone will enable me to understand and fully participate in conversations by delivering the sounds of voices directly to my cochlear implant. This technology costs around \$1600; it will help me in college, as there will be many situations where I participate in group projects or study sessions.