

*Intelligence, beauty,
talent, confidence,
and a hearing loss...
all in one graceful
package.*

By Barbara Kelley

Alexa Vasiliadis

Alexa Vasiliadis is 17 and a junior at Langley High School in McLean, Virginia, where she is in advanced placement classes. She is a member of both the National Honor Society and the Spanish Honor Society. She enjoys art—especially painting—and her subjects tend to be dance-related or portraits of family members.

Outside of school, she studies dance at the Classical Ballet Academy of Northern Virginia and participates in approximately 25 hours of dance per week (including both classes and rehearsals Monday through Sunday). She takes classes in ballet, pointe, partnering, character (Russian folk dancing), modern, and jazz.

Alexa has one younger brother, Austin, who is an eighth grader at Cooper Middle School in Northern Virginia. She says she is very fortunate to live near both sets of grandparents, two aunts and uncles, and nine cousins!

We first heard of Alexa last December when she was dancing in a performance of the Nutcracker Ballet by Tchaikovsky. Our photographer, Cindy Dyer, got a back stage and front-row view through her camera lens and captured Alexa on these pages for you.

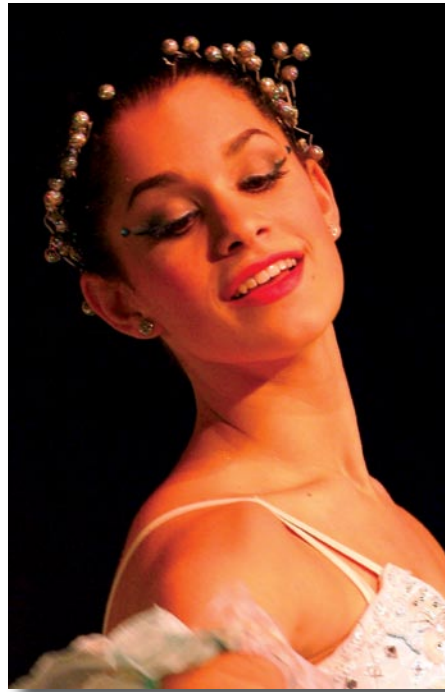
Alexa and her mother, Lynne, were generous to share their time with us. This young woman carries no light schedule with her studies and dance, in addition to a bustling family life.

We hope you enjoy Alexa as much as we enjoyed meeting and photographing her. And, we hope to check in with Alexa as she transitions from high school to college.

Talking with Lynne (Alexa's mother)

Hearing Loss Magazine (HLM): Lynne, how did you first learn that Alexa had a hearing loss?

Lynne: Alexa was born in 1991, which was before hospitals began routine and sometimes mandatory audiological screening for newborns. We first discovered Alexa's hearing loss when she was three-and-a-half or four years old. Her father called from work to say hello and when Alexa answered



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the phone, she was unable to hear his voice. I happened to have another receiver close by and was able to hear him clearly, so I suggested that she switch the phone to her other ear. She could then hear what he was saying and it was at that moment that I knew there was a problem.

Looking back, we had always had considerable difficulty communicating in the car with her. I later realized this was because she was sitting behind me in her car seat and was unable to read my lips when I spoke. As she was my first child, I assumed our difficulty communicating in the car was normal toddler behavior, and because her speech had developed normally, it never occurred to me that it could be anything else.

HLM: What did you do next?

Lynne: After the phone incident, my husband who is a physician recommended that I take her to see

Dr. Ted Fetter, an otolaryngologist in Vienna, Virginia. After an examination, he referred Alexa to his audiologist, Cheryl Rice.

Alexa was diagnosed with bilateral hearing loss—a mild loss in her right ear and moderate loss in her left. The audiologist explained that the type of loss which Alexa presented could be a genetic defect, something that developed in utero, or the result of a prior ear infection.

We scheduled her for ear drum tubes and made an appointment for her to be fitted with a hearing aid. I remember her preschool teacher at the Nysmith School being very surprised at the news of her hearing loss. Even at a young age, Alexa was a very good student and had apparently learned to adapt to her environment, relying heavily on lip-reading.

In first grade, she went to Great Falls Elementary, and in third grade, she was accepted into Fairfax County's Gifted and Talented Program. On a number of occasions, I inquired about arranging for services for Alexa, but because she was a successful student, I was told she was ineligible.

HLM: How did you feel when you heard the diagnosis?

Lynne: I remember the day the audiologist broke the news regarding Alexa's hearing loss. Every parent wants his or her child to be healthy and happy and to have every possible advantage in life. Hearing loss was unfamiliar territory for me; the news brought with it a multitude of feelings...surprise, sadness, uncertainty, disbelief and worry.

After coming to terms with the diagnosis, I was determined to help Alexa view her hearing loss as matter-of-factly as possible. I hoped that over time she would equate wearing a hearing aid to someone wearing glasses for poor eyesight or braces for crooked teeth and not something to be embarrassed about or uncomfortable with. (Although hearing aids don't "correct" hearing, it was the most useful analogy I could come up with.)

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En Pointe *continued from page 11*

HLM: How did your toddler react to getting a hearing aid?

Lynne: Most young children are curious and uninhibited by nature; so Alexa had to learn early on how to explain, 'that thing' in her ear and what its purpose was. It was important that she be confident enough to handle this type of attention on her own. Discovering Alexa's hearing loss at such an early age was a blessing because it is all she knows; and wearing her hearing aid is just part of her daily routine.

Talking to Alexa

HLM: When did you become interested in ballet?

Alexa: I started taking dance classes in kindergarten, but by the time I reached third grade I decided to focus on piano and soccer. Soon after, I realized how much I missed dancing, and decided to start it up again. However, this time I took mostly jazz and modern with a little ballet.

It was not until my first year of high school that I really became serious about my ballet training. Since then I have been taking ballet classes Monday through Friday for at least two hours each day (sometimes three), and supplementing this training with modern, jazz, character (Russian folk dance), conditioning, partnering, and Pilates; each once a week. Rehearsals are on Saturdays and Sundays and we have two productions a year in addition to multiple community service events.

HLM: Do you wear hearing aids?

Alexa: I wear one hearing aid in my right ear. I also have hearing loss in my left ear but it is mild enough that I feel a hearing aid is unnecessary.

HLM: Does having a hearing loss come into play with your dancing?

Alexa: Hearing loss does not have a significant effect on my dancing. However, it does force me to be much more aware of my surroundings and

the people dancing near me. Hearing the music is rarely an issue, because it is usually fairly loud. However, I do have difficulty hearing my teachers' voices and understanding if they are speaking over the music.

During rehearsals when there are multiple instructors in the studio it can be very difficult to differentiate who is speaking to whom when corrections are being given simultaneously. This is especially true when the music is playing and I am dancing since I prefer to look at the person speaking to me.

Occasionally I will have to ask the teacher to repeat a correction or comment. Like in school, if I have a new teacher. For example, when I go away for summer programs, I must inform them of my hearing loss. However, this does not present too great of a problem overall.

HLM: What has been your favorite role you've danced? Is there any role you hope to dance in the future?

Alexa: I've danced many roles that I've enjoyed, but one of my favorites was dancing the role of Snow Queen in the *Nutcracker*. I love any opportunity to perform, so any role—no matter how big or how small—is a role I look forward to dancing.

HLM: Do you know other people your age with hearing loss?

Alexa: One of my friends from dance does have hearing loss, but she does not wear a hearing aid.

HLM: Please tell us about your hearing loss.

Alexa: My hearing loss is something I am accustomed to, as it is all I have ever known. I am not self-conscious about it and do not feel negatively toward it at all. Sometimes, if I am meeting a person for the first time, they won't notice I have a hearing loss. If I find myself repeatedly asking them to speak up, I will then explain to them the reason. My hearing loss does force me to pay very close attention to what people are saying to me. I sometimes get frustrated when

I cannot hear someone in a noisy or crowded situation, or if they are speaking softly in my 'bad' ear.

The cafeteria at school can be very noisy and a difficult place to communicate which is frustrating because for most people, lunch time is a great opportunity to socialize with friends. However, I am used to my condition and my friends, family members, and peers know that if I cannot hear them they will have to "switch sides" or I will turn my head so they can speak on my left side.

One more scenario that is difficult for me is in the car, especially if I am driving or sitting in the back of the car and there is loud music playing or it is windy. This is because in addition to the added noise, I cannot see who is talking, and I often subconsciously rely on reading lips.

I am used to the difficulties that come with hearing loss, and often forget I even have hearing loss. I feel that it is a part of who I am, but it does not define me.

HLM: Do you use any assistive devices in the classroom? Do you have to educate teachers about how to communicate with you? Do you have an IEP (Individualized Education Plan)? Have you had to advocate for yourself to get the type of communication help you need?

Alexa: In school, I do not use any assistive devices or have an IEP. At the beginning of the school year, I always make sure to inform my teachers of my hearing loss and what it entails. I often will not have any trouble

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hearing a teacher, especially if I am in a small classroom and his or her voice carries well. However, in the event that a teacher is very soft-spoken, mumbles, or there is lots of excess noise, I may have to sit in the front of the classroom.

Acoustics—air conditioning vents, computer buzz, and open doors—sometimes present a problem but I am never hesitant to ask a teacher to repeat something if I missed what was said. However, with hearing loss, if you miss something, sometimes you don't always realize it. Overall, I think that communicating with me is just like communicating with any other student.

HLM: Do you know about Vocational Rehabilitation?

Alexa: No, I'm not familiar with it.

HLM: What are you most looking forward to in the next year?

Alexa: Being a senior!

HLM: Have you thought about your choice of a college yet?

Alexa: Since I am a junior, I have really just begun the whole process. I have visited a number of Virginia schools as well as a few out-of-state schools. I am currently in the process of researching schools to try to figure out where I want to apply.

HLM: How do you research colleges?

Alexa: I have been researching colleges via websites such as Princeton Review, College Board, and Family Connection (a college database provided by my school). I have also done some college visits and attended the informational meetings and campus tours. It has also been helpful to talk to my friends who are seniors and learn from their experiences.

HLM: In your research, have you looked into communication access on the campus? In classrooms, dorms, fire alarms, phones? Have you checked out colleges with disability services departments?

Alexa: No, I haven't.

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Alexa's favorite role was that of the Snow Queen in the Nutcracker.

En Pointe *continued from page 13*

HLM: What do you plan on studying in college?

Alexa: As of now, I am undecided. However, I am considering nutrition, exercise science, physical therapy, and psychology. I also really enjoy art, languages, and working with people (especially kids), which may lead me to another area of study.

HLM: Any other hobbies? Favorite movie? TV shows?

Alexa: I like to paint in acrylic—most portraits. I have painted my family. I like to go to the movies. *A Walk to Remember* is one of my favorites. We use TIVO Because I never have time to watch shows when they're on. My favorites are *So You Think You Can Dance*, *American Idol*, and *Gray's Anatomy*.

HLM: What are your plans for this summer?

Alexa: I will be attending a six-week summer intensive program at the Houston Ballet's Ben Stevenson Academy.

HLM: Will you continue to dance?

Alexa: Yes, as long as my body allows. It's what I love! 🎭

Barbara Kelley is editor-in-chief of Hearing Loss Magazine and deputy executive director of HLAA. She can be reached at bkelly@hearingloss.org.

*Hearing Loss Magazine would like to thank the Classical Ballet Academy in Northern Virginia for allowing us to photograph *The Nutcracker* performance in December, as well as use of the studio for additional photographs. Visit CBA's website at www.cbanva.com.*



Alexa with her mother, Lynne

HLAA Initiates Meeting with Surgeon General on Issue of Hearing Loss

May 12, 2008, Washington, D.C.:

Brenda Battat, executive director of Hearing Loss Association of America, and members of six other organizations met with Acting Surgeon General Steven K. Galson to talk about the need for more public education about hearing loss. The group stressed the need to start a public dialogue about the causes, impact on physical and psychosocial well being of untreated hearing loss, treatment options available, and the need to protect hearing from noise. There are 31 million Americans with hearing loss with 10 million resulting from noise exposure that could have been prevented but cannot be reversed.



From left, back to front: Karen Sealander (International Hearing Society), Barbara Raimondo (National Association of the Deaf), Alex Graham (A.G. Bell Association), Rear Admiral Steven K. Galson, acting surgeon general, Andy Bopp (Hearing Industries Association), Brenda Battat (HLAA), Pam Mason (ASHA), Phil Bongiorno (American Academy of Audiology), Joy Trimmer (American Academy of Otolaryngology-HNS), and Rear Admiral Robert C. Williams, acting deputy surgeon general.