

DR. SIMON PARISIER

HEARING HERO

TALKING TO SUSAN CHEFFO ON THE phone is a remarkable experience—the 53-year-old Long Island principal of the Bethpage Hearing and Vision School has been profoundly deaf for over a decade. But three years ago, Dr. Simon Parisier surgically implanted a tiny transistor in her ear. It was like opening a door to a new world. "He's exceptional," she says of her doctor. "He's not just a technician. He's someone who is invested in having young children and adults hear who were not able to hear." Cochlear implants transpose sound into electrical stimuli that the brain can interpret. Parisier first started working with them in 1979, but it wasn't until the past five years that the technology really took off. Last year, Lenox Hill hospital's Cochlear Implant Center, which Parisier founded, did 120 implants, some in children as young as eleven months. "Patients don't know how lucky they are," says David Edelstein, the chairman of Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital. "He's absolutely the most consistent doctor, whether you see him at eight in the morning on Monday or five in the afternoon on Friday, and you don't know how unusual that is in surgery." Parisier's work is highly controversial within the deaf community. "They accuse us of trying to fix something that's not broken," Parisier says. "Profoundly deaf people are generally ostracized by hearing people. That's what has led to the deaf culture." Although Parisier sees the need that deaf culture fills, he couldn't disagree more with those who suggest that deafness shouldn't be treated. "Of all the handicap populations," he says, "the ones who earn the least are the profoundly deaf. They have limited educational achievements, which makes it tough to find a job. Speech, hearing, and language skills are the tools that you need to achieve an education. And that's really the goal of cochlear implants, not just hearing."

Parisier began his career specializing in head and neck cancer but soon realized it wasn't for him. "Failure in head-and-neck-cancer work means death," he explains. "Different doctors have different personalities; I didn't handle those kinds of failures very well." He dabbled in cosmetic surgery but still wasn't satisfied. Finally, as an ear surgeon, he discovered work that was gratifying both emotionally and intellectually. "Otolologists were the first to use the surgical microscope, and that was just fantastic—the bones of hearing are very pretty—and you could do a technically sophisticated procedure and restore someone's hearing, and that was like 'Wow!'"

Today he gets the same thrill every time he turns on a toddler's implant for the first time. "It's pretty dramatic," he says. "It's the first sound they've ever heard. And if Mommy's in the room, she's going to cry. It's a great feeling."

MICHAEL STEELE

