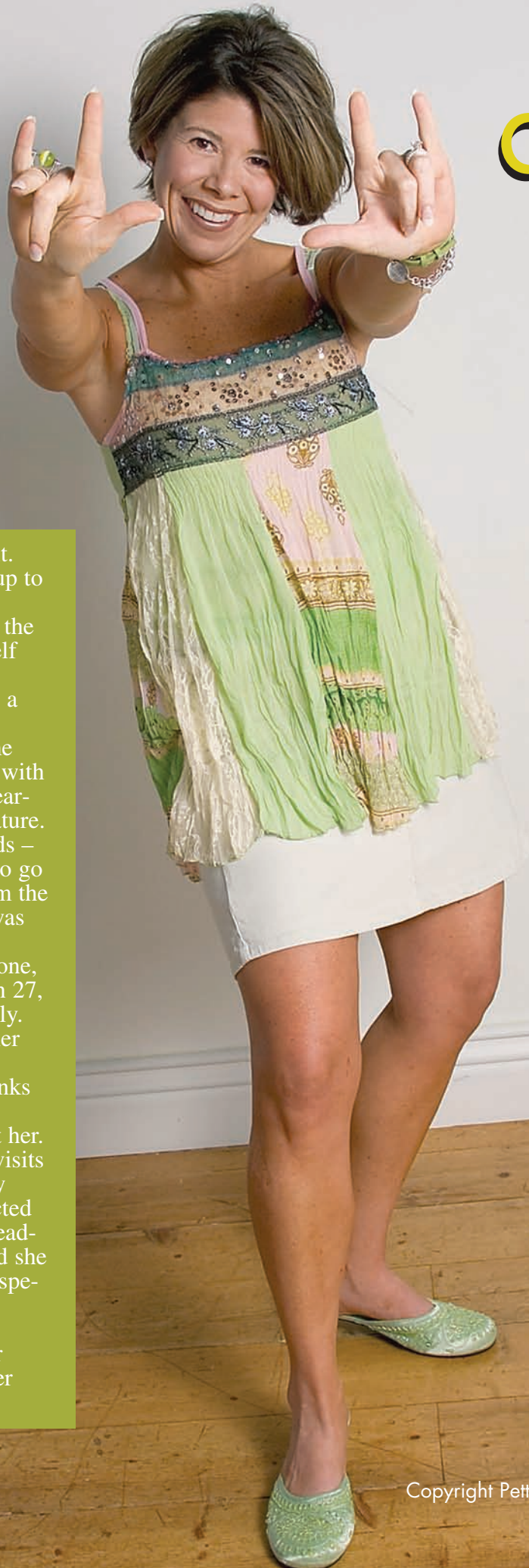


# 'Sun

# and



Story by John Moody

Michelle Tjelmeland can take it. Whatever life's dishing out, she's up to the task. She's had to be.

When you are 23, pregnant for the first time and suddenly find yourself living in a silent world, the tough among us had better get going; it's a matter of survival.

Tjelmeland, (a Norwegian name pronounced Chum-land) was born with the ability to hear, but she had a hearing defect; it was progressive in nature. By 17, she had her first hearing aids – “definitely not the cute accessory to go with my mini-skirt,” she says. From the ages of 17 to 22, the progression was really rapid.

And her pregnancy, a difficult one, only made things worse. On March 27, 1998, Ellie arrived two months early.

It turned out that the new mother couldn't hear the new baby's cries. And, as they would learn later, thanks to Michelle's intuition, Ellie never heard her mother trying to comfort her.

After nine months of doctors' visits around the country, with her theory about her new baby's hearing rejected time and again, Tjelmeland was steadfast, her usual determined self. And she was also right. A world-renowned specialist in New Orleans finally confirmed her suspicions.

Ellie received her first cochlear implant in 1999, the year before her

Copyright Petty Photography, 2006

# rain make rainbows!



Copyright Petty Photography, 2006

Michelle Tjelmeland uses both hands, at far left, to sign, "I love you."

Tjelmeland, a success in business, had to leave a teaching career behind due to deafness.

mother. Both adjusted, with Ellie learning to talk and Michelle re-learning her lost communication skills.

Ellie didn't speak her first sentence until the age of 5, but she has caught up with her third-grade class at Rochester Elementary.

The guy who's been there every step of the way for his girls is Joel. He and Michelle have been married for nine years.

"We are black and white; I'm a crazy workaholic, and he's easy going with a good sense of humor," she says. "He's my

anchor; he supports me 150 percent."

With all that has come to them in the way of challenges, it's no wonder that she has described their journey as a sometimes "rough, gravel road."

But make no mistake; there is much love in this home. You need look no further than the glowing faces this union has wrought: Ellie, now 8 and Lucy, 6.

Joel, 39, is the owner of Tjelmeland Laketown Automotive, and he serves on the Sangamon County Board.

They started dating when she was 20 – back when she could

hear, as she puts it.

She has worried over the changing years about him and the fact that he didn't fall in love with a deaf girl. But that's right there in the marriage vows, isn't it? "For richer or poorer, in sickness and in health ..."

"He loves the deaf girl he has," she says with a prideful grin.

Joel calls his wife a "very high-energy, very happy person." She is, he says, also "very short-fused, but she gets happy quick and gets over things quickly."

He's proud of her determination, her motivation and her passion for helping others.

During their courtship, he



recalls watching television with her.

"She had hearing aids when we were dating but didn't wear them all the time, and I remember if we watched TV, she wanted the closed captioning on. I thought, 'I like this girl, but I'm never going to be able to watch TV with her,'" he chuckles.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, the saying goes, and the Tjelmelands surely know more than most folks about love and hanging tough.

"Things change so much; there's so many things you have to go through," Michelle says with thought and some emotion. "It takes both sun and rain to make a rainbow."

Getting through college was quite a challenge as her hearing was more and more compromised, but she made it and made it on time. She earned her bachelor's from Eastern Illinois University in education with a minor in English.

"I had to tape lectures and listen to each lesson four, five, six times

to understand what was going on," she recalls. "My days started at 4 a.m. and ended at 1 or 2 a.m."

But, why on earth put yourself through all that?

The answer's an easy one: "I'm not a quitter; I'm a fighter, that's for sure. Quitting is easy."

If she removes the implant from her ear, she can't hear. And when the batteries need recharging, she is, she says, constantly reminded of her deafness.

When you are speaking to someone with a hearing deficit, what you notice, among other things, is their eyes. The Tjelmeland girls use their eyes to listen, probably like we all should; their eyes are zeroed in on your face – your lips in particular – interpreting cues with more than one finely-honed sense. These folks are communicators, signal masters.

But it's not just Michelle and Ellie because little Lucy, who has perfect hearing, seems to penetrate with her eyes, too.

Maybe it's just a family trait


that has nothing at all to do with deafness. Call it an engaged alertness framed by all-American good looks, scrubbed cheeks and charm. Whatever it may be, it comes through in the eyes, smart and on guard, but warm and very deep – like they lead way, way down turning and tunneling to the very core.

Michelle eventually had to give up a teaching career, which had just gotten started four years before in language arts for District 186. She had another baby; Lucy arrived in 2000, blessed with hearing and a lively personality.

"Lucy has a very strong personality; she's on her own channel, which I'm sure will serve her well in life," her father says.

Both pregnancies required weeks of bed rest. Michelle used the resting time while carrying Lucy to get a master's degree in computer technology and education. Oh yeah, she graduated with a perfect 4.0 grade point average.

And thus she reinvented herself and started her multiple award-win-



**Counter Intelligence**  
Fits over existing countertops  
Heat, stain and scratch resistant  
Lifetime Limited Warranty

*Granite Transformations countertops are engineered to have both beauty and brains! From the heat, stain and scratch resistant technology, to the ease of installation and the amazing range of beautiful colors and combinations, it's real granite only better! From remodeling to new construction, from your home to your office. Innovation never looked so good!*

**Call for your FREE in-home consultation!  
Toll Free 309.661.8155 or visit our KIOSK at  
White Oaks Mall on the main level near Sears.  
[www.fitsonetop.com](http://www.fitsonetop.com)**



The Countertop That Fits On Top

ning Web-design business, *e-websmart*. Most recently, at a conference in San Francisco, she was honored with the annual Business Optimist Award by The National Association of Women Business Owners.

The most high profile award came last year when she was one of five winners of Microsoft's "Start Something Amazing Awards." The award honors "the unique and inspiring ways that people use Microsoft Windows-related technology in simple yet powerful ways to pursue their everyday passions."

She spent several days in Redmond, Wash., and received her award from Bill Gates himself.

"Meeting Bill Gates and the Microsoft team was certainly a red-carpet experience. I was treated like royalty," she says.

On July 18, she and Ellie had their second cochlear implant surgeries, done on the same day by the same surgeon, Dr. Michael Novak at Carle Hospital in Urbana.

Both have recovered well, but it

was harder on Michelle this time around. It is, after all, brain surgery.

On a day when Michelle was having difficulty with the situation and the impending surgery, Ellie said to her tearful mother, "It's no big deal; we just can't hear."

Ellie wanted the surgery from the start while Michelle had reservations about going through it again.

"It's been difficult, but I feel great now. I'm crazy-happy, like somebody flipped a switch, and I've gone from being totally depressed to so happy," she says.

When the implants were turned on to sound for the first time, Michelle hated it, but within 20 minutes, she was coming around, and in an hour, she was almost on board totally.

"Joel went down the hall, about three offices away, and said, 'I love you,' and I could hear him," she says. "The whole room was crying – my audiologist for 10 years and the doctors."

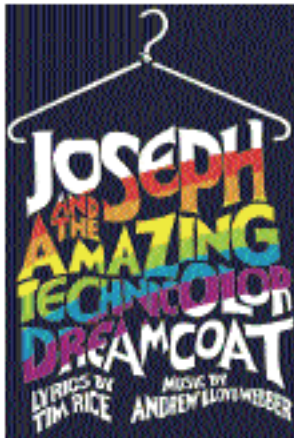


Joel holds Lucy while Michelle and Ellie cuddle up for a family photo. Photo courtesy of Michelle Tjelmeland.

She's hearing sounds now that she hasn't heard since she was a teenager – some of it is scary.

"I recently heard a baby cry, and I thought, 'Oh my God, what was that?'" she says. "I was putting on hairspray with an aerosol can, and I didn't know it made that sound, so I kept spraying it over and over. Water running is another one – they're all sounds I hadn't

...the *hottest* tickets in town!



[www.SANGAMONAUDITORIUM.ORG](http://www.SANGAMONAUDITORIUM.ORG)

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT SPRINGFIELD

