Besa Shala and her family embarked on a 5,296 mile journey when she was just 2 years old to give her the gift of hearing.

For 78 straight days, bombs fell on Besa Shala’s village in Kosovo, Besa, then just 1-year-old, couldn’t hear a single one.

All that young Besa knew of the Kosovo War was the shaking of the ground she felt and the tragedies she saw.

Besa, now a freshman, was born profoundly deaf. In the 13 years since her experiences in Kosovo, she has immigrated to the United States, received cochlear implants, and can hear the world around her.

“I don’t see myself as having a disability because I can do anything a hearing person can do,” Besa said. “My parents have taught me that there are worse things in the world.”

The explosions started every morning around 4 a.m.

The ten-bedroom-three-bathroom house trembled after every bomb detonated. Each time, the 200 Kosovar refugees inside feared for their lives.

“We never knew if we would wake up the next morning alive,” Hyre Shala, Besa’s mother, said. “We would sleep every night with our clothes on because we never knew what was going to happen or when danger would come. I would pray every night that me and my family would live and, if we didn’t, then at least for us to all pass on together.”
H
tyre and her husband Al knew they had to get out of war-torn Kosovo if they wanted their four children to have any kind of future, especially one where Besa had a chance to hear.

"Even during the war, Besa’s hearing was the most important thing," Mr. Shala said. "But Kosovar doctors told us there was no chance. We had to face the idea that our daughter would be deaf her whole life because our country had no technology to do anything for her."

Besa’s parents continued searching for answers while living in Kosovo. They hoped that Besa would one day hear them tell her that they loved her.

In the Shala’s native tongue of Albanian, Besa means faith, something the Shala family had to rely on.

"Every day we would check the newspaper, check the TV, and ask people around us if they knew of anything we could do to give her a better life," Mr. Shala said. "We didn't know about all the technology back then – we were looking for anything."

Their answer came in the guise of an English woman sent from an international relief organization, Operation Angel. During the Kosovo war, Operation Angel focused on finding families with children in need of serious medical care. When the organization learned about Besa, they contacted Dr. Robert Peters who works with the Dallas Hearing Foundation.

If Dr. Peters could arrange for the Shala family to come to America with a medical visa, Operation Angel would fund Besa’s surgery and get her cochlear implants.

Mr. and Mrs. Shala’s dream for their daughter was becoming reality. Now they simply needed to escape Kosovo and get to the United States to make it come true.

With the help of Operation Angel, a plan was formulated to leave the country. But when they were ready to leave, the Serbian army, on an active campaign to ethnically cleanse the region, barricaded the roads out of Kosovo. The Shala family and the 21 other refugees fleeing with them were forced to take the “wild route” up the steep and rugged Bështë e Namuna mountains.

Everyone piled their food supplies and belongings into one van and two cars – because the supplies took up room in the cars, most of the refugees had to walk up the mountains. The Shala family took only the clothing on their backs. Besa, still a toddler, had to be carried the entire time in her mother’s tired arms.

The Bështë e Namuna mountains are also called “The Accursed Mountains” because native Albanians say that the mountain’s peaks of up to 9,000 feet are insurmountable. On the day the refugees tried to escape, the mountains earned their name, though this time it wasn’t because of their dangerous natural features.

"Two days into walking up the mountains, the Kosovo Liberation Army came and told us that the Serbian army had mined the mountains," Mrs. Sha
al said. "They told us to go back because it wasn’t safe to keep going. My husband and I didn’t want to risk going forward because we had four children with us. So we had to turn around and climb all the way back down the mountain and back to the village. I was so, so sad because I wanted to escape and leave the war behind."

The rest of the group kept walking. While they didn’t hit any mines, they did encounter the Serbian army.

"No one was killed, but they were all terrified and some got broken bones," Mrs. Shala said. "The English lady was arrested and kept in jail for two weeks without food or water. But she was able to get a message to us saying that when she got out, she’d try and come back for us and would help us try to get out again."

The Shala family spent months hoping their rescuer would return. She was back that September.

This time, she led the band of 27 refugees to the banks of the Buna River. There, they climbed in to a small rowboat – children in the center, adults on the edge – and began rowing towards Albanian territory. The swarming mosquitoes, thick darkness, and fast-moving waters didn’t make the crowded ride any easier.

"That boat ride was so scary," Mrs. Shala said. "But when we finally got to land and I first stepped on to Albania territory, I was so happy because there was no war there. I didn't care about the future, I just was glad to turn to my back on war."

The Shala family arrived in America on November 14, 1998, and met with Dr. Peters the very next day. They didn’t want to waste any time giving their daughter the gift of hearing.

"When they came and met with me, they looked very tired and uncertain being in a foreign country for the first time," Dr. Peters said. "I could tell that all Mr. Shala cared about was getting help for Besa."

Getting help for Besa proved to be more difficult than originally planned. Operation Angel lost all its funding and was no longer able to supply the surgery which costs $50,000 per ear. Dr. Peters didn’t let that stop him.

"Dallas Hearing Foundation (DHF) went into action and raised money and donations to make it possible," Dr. Peters said. "However, before I would do
her surgery. I wanted to make sure the Shalas would be granted political asylum in the United States in addition to their six-month medical visa. This way, Besa would be able to stay near us where we could care for her implants. The implants would do her no good if she was forced to go back to Kosovo where there were no means to take care of them. Once political asylum was granted we proceeded with cochlear implant surgery on her first ear.”

Dr. Peters raised the $50,000 needed through DHF, asked the manufacturer of the cochlear implants to donate the device, talked the hospital into charging a discounted price for the operating room, and both he and the anesthesiologist donated their services. He has repeated this process for about 150 other children in addition to Besa.

Before Besa went in for surgery, Mrs. Shala visited with some of Dr. Peters patients who could only hear because of cochlear implants. While talking with them, all Mrs. Shala could do was cry.

“It was a miracle,” she said. “I saw all these children who were born deaf like Besa, but they were reacting to their parents when they called to them, reciting the English alphabet, and talking… I just cried and cried.”

One month after Dr. Peters drilled into 2-year-old Besa’s skull and inserted the implants, a team of audiology and doctors activated the devices.

The first thing Mrs. Shala said to her daughter was in her native tongue.

“Shpritimamit, my sweetheart, I love you so much,” she cried.

Usually, when deaf children hear for the first time, they’re frightened by the foreign sounds streaming in through their ears. Besa only laughed. Her parents laughed with her.

“That day was the best day of our lives,” Mr. Shala said. “It was a miracle. We never thought our daughter would be able to hear.”

One year after Besa received her implants, she turned 3 years old and was ready for school. Mrs. Shala was told by Pre-K teachers that it usually took about two weeks for a typical child to adjust to riding the bus, finding the classroom, and being away from mom.

Mrs. Shala wanted to make her daughter’s transition into public education as painless as possible.

For ten mornings leading up to Besa’s first day at school, Mrs. Shala would wake her daughter up, put her backpack on, and walk her outside to watch as her neighbor’s daughter boarded the school bus. Then she would take Besa inside and draw Besa’s picture inside of the bus next to other students.

She would continue drawing out Besa’s whole day – from boarding the bus to walking to class to coming home and giving Mommy a hug.

Mrs. Shala has two boxes of composition books filled with pictures like these. To prepare Besa for school, she used her background as an architect to teach her daughter language through art.

On Besa’s first day at school, she didn’t cry or get lost. What takes typical children two weeks to master took Besa one day.


Each of Besa’s seven teachers raved about her impeccable grades – all A’s and always one of the highest averages in the class – and her attitude.

“I wish I had a hundred students like Besa,” math teacher Kristi Cies said.

The Richardson Independent School District has provided Besa with a speech teacher, a free FM device, the chance to choose where she sits in the classroom, closed captioning on all videos shown in class, and the right to use a note-taker.

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photos courtesy of the Shala family
While the accommodations made by the school help, the reason she excels in her advanced classes with near perfect grades is because of her determination and natural smarts.

“For her to be taking AP and PreAP classes and have her writing skills be what they are... Well, she’s really gone way above and beyond where a typical student with cochlear implants at her age would be,” speech teacher Heather Rozelle said. “She works really hard.”

Besa and Ms. Rozelle discuss advocacy in their weekly meetings. Ms. Rozelle encourages Besa to stick up for herself in the classroom and with friends if she needs something repeated or explained. Together, they talk through different situations – like people asking her if she is deaf – and how she should handle them.

“Besa definitely self-advocates,” AP Human Geography teacher Jean Chapman said. “On the very first day of school she came and introduced herself, explained that she is hearing-impaired, and told me how I could help her. Now I can make sure that I am always facing her and that I adapt my teaching style to help her hear me. But honestly, she’s such a good student, it makes adapting my pleasure.”

One adaptation teachers have made is wearing the FM device.

The FM device is worn around each teacher’s neck and acts as a sort of microphone. Everything they say is made louder by the small, square machine and transmitted directly into Besa’s ears through her cochlear implants.

But when paired with lip-reading, this device makes it possible for Besa to hear almost everything going on in class – and even some things she shouldn’t hear.

“Sometimes when a teacher takes a student out in the hall and lectures him, he’ll forget he’s still wearing the FM device,” Besa said. “It’s really funny when all of the sudden I’ll hear someone get in trouble outside of the classroom.”

Besa’s brain still works overtime to comprehend all the information.

“Listening and understanding the information is exhausting for people with hearing loss,” Ms. Rozelle said. “When comparing students who have hearing loss with those who don’t, most hearing impaired students are exhausted by the end of the day. They have to listen, comprehend, take notes, and lip read all at the same time. It’s a brain’s workout.”

The best help Besa receives comes from her friends. Teachers notice how they are always willing to repeat an answer for Besa, lend her their notes, or speak louder for her.

“In Spanish class, I’ll repeat an assignment for Besa to make sure she got it,” freshman Rehabet Ey-assu said. “But most of the time she’s the one helping me. If I don’t know a word she’ll always translate it for me. She’s really good at Spanish.”

Friends and teachers say Besa doesn’t let being hearing impaired keep her down. While this is mostly true, Besa still deals with adversity related to hearing loss.

She said the worst was seventh grade and the beginning of junior high at Richardson West. It was the first time she’d been around so many kids at one time. The bus rides were brutal – and loud. She’d try and get in on all the conversations, but the other kids would get annoyed with her saying “what?” all the time and asking them to repeat themselves. So she’d end up sitting alone with her mystery novels.

“I couldn’t handle it,” Besa said. “I got tired of trying so hard to listen. I felt like an annoying person who people didn’t want to hang out with. But my mom reminded me that I’m lucky to even be able to hear at all since a lot of people don’t have cochlear implants. After that, I worked harder to hear people in loud, busy places and didn’t give up.”

Since then, Besa has found ways to enjoy herself in hectic places.

Beneath the shadow of Big Tex and the Texas Star Ferris Wheel, hundreds of teenage girls swarmed towards the stage. The Jonas Brothers were performing at the State Fair of Texas, and Besa and her cousin didn’t want to miss out on the concert.

“At the concert, my cousin would lean down to tell me every time I needed to scream out ‘SOS,’” Besa said. “Even though I can only hear the beat in music and not the lyrics, my cousin helped me and so I still found a way to sing along. It was so much fun.”

Only being able to hear the beats has not interfered with Besa’s love for both music and dance.

“I’m good at dancing because I can follow the beats really easily,” Besa said. “I can just tell what the next beat will be – it’s like a pattern to me. At first, it’s hard to grasp the dance all at once, but after doing it over and over, I do fine. I love dancing, it makes me go wild.”

Besa is not sure what her future will hold – perhaps a job centering around helping people with disabilities greater than her own or something to do with animals.

“Depending on what she pursues, there will be certain challenges,” Ms. Rozelle said. “For example, the stethoscope she would need to hear an animal’s heart would have to have certain adaptations and it would be difficult for her to take phone calls from pet owners and evaluate an animal’s breathing.”

But Besa said nothing like that will keep her from achieving her goals, no matter what they transform into as she grows older.

“I’ve never let being hearing impaired affect me before and I won’t start in the future,” Besa said.

Mr. Shala is proud of everything that Besa has done with her life. From her grades to her personality, he simply calls his daughter “perfect.”

“Besa’s story has two sides – the sad side and the very, very happy side,” Mr. Shala said. “On one hand, she was born deaf in a war-torn country. But, there is a happy ending. She got cochlear implants and we live in the best country in the world. Here, she has the opportunity to be something. We are so proud and glad to have our life here.”

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1. The **external speech processor** captures sound and converts it into digital signals.

2. The processor sends those digital signals to the **internal implant**.

3. The **transmitter** sends the signals to the implant located in the cochlea (11). The transmitter includes a magnet that helps the user align the processor with the implant.

4. The **microphone** magnifies the volume of the signals.

5. The **speech processor** analyzes the sound and converts it into an electrical signal.

6. The **malleus** is a small bone that transmits vibrations of the eardrum to the incus.

7. The **incus** is a small bone in the ear. The vibrations of the incus are what, in normal ears, causes the cochlea to move which creates sound signals.

8. The **external ear canal** is where the sound travels through.

9. The vibrations also travel through the **eardrum**.

10. 24 **electrodes** make up Besa’s electrode array. These electrodes receive the electrical signals sent from the speech processor. The amount of electrical current will determine loudness of the sound, and the position of the electrodes will determine the sound’s pitch.

11. The **cochlea** is where the internal implant is placed. In normal ears, it detects pressure impulses and responds with electrical impulses which travel along the auditory nerve to the brain.

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**The Cochlear Implant**

[Diagram of the cochlear implant showing parts such as the external speech processor, transmitter, electrodes, etc.]

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