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Hear and Now

Born deaf, Jordan Levin runs a CrossFit affiliate and is a motivational speaker. Lon Wagner tells the story.

By Lon Wagner

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I am talking, on the phone, to Jordan Levin.

1 of 7



Levin decided early in life that a disability wouldn't stop him from doing anything.

Normal.

Mundane, even.

When I emailed Jordan, I wasn't sure how this would go, how we would do the interview. Maybe it'd have to be done through email. Or a chat window.

"It would be best for me to call you," Jordan had emailed back and explained how it would work.

"Let me know what number and what time I can call you on Thursday."

Great, but I wonder how this is going to go, I thought.

Here's the thing. Jordan Levin was born deaf.

"Profoundly deaf," the doctors pronounced him 35 years ago.

And he still is.

"Right now," Jordan says, his voice sounding pretty normal after having traveled 700 miles from Michigan to my cell phone, "I am talking to you on my iPhone, and everything you say is showing up on the screen."

It works like closed captioning on TV.

"There's a little bit of a delay, so I want to make sure I know what you are saying."

I explain that, well, the delay is probably from me. Writers, you know, try to be so precise with every word that ... to be honest, lots of times ... I tend to pause a lot. My speech is probably ... giving your software fits.

"It's not a problem," he says kindly. "You're using just enough pauses. I can keep up better that way."

This is just all so "normal," I think. Though this is one of those times that normal is completely unexpected.

This is not about faking normal with an iPhone. It's not being made normal through the technological advancement of hearing aids. It's not about making do with sign language.

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Jordan became normal through the to-the-core stubbornness of his parents, through his own striving and persistence and insistence—and, a little bit, obliviousness.

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Jordan Levin earned normal.

Denying Defeat

On this day, Jordan has taken a break from his business to conduct the interview. He and his wife, Hillary, own CrossFit Bloomfield.

To fully understand how abnormal it is for Jordan to be normal, it's best to start at the beginning. His mother, Mollene, can explain that.

Early in Mollene's pregnancy, doctors told her she would likely miscarry between her third and fourth month. She made it well past that.

She was home alone one night. Her husband, Marty, was at work and had to rush home.



In the box, Levin relies on lip reading to communicate with his athletes.



When you've overcome deafness, a weighted pull-up seems a bit easier.

"I had absolutely no labor," she said. "To be honest, we thought he was a miscarriage, but then he started crying."

No doctor, nurse, midwife was with her at the house. Jordan had come three months early. He weighed 1 pound 15 ounces. At the hospital, he dropped to 1 pound 11 ounces. Doctors told the Levins that, often, "those babies" never get out of the hospital.

Jordan was on a respirator for two months, in the hospital for four months total. Hearing impairment wasn't a concern—surviving was.

Jordan was around two years old before they figured out he was hearing impaired. He had fooled them. He would feel the vibration of a person walking up the steps and greet him or her standing at his crib railing—as though he had heard them coming. Instinctively, he came to know that when a person's lips were moving, he was being addressed.

"He was a natural lip reader," Marty said. "That's what fooled us."

But how deaf was he?

"To give you an idea," Mollene said, "if you are profoundly deaf and a fire engine goes by, without hearing aids you won't hear it."

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By the time the Levins discovered this, Jordan was not only deaf, but he had also missed two-plus years of therapy that they could have done if they had known.

Professionals suggested the usual route: a school for the hearing impaired and sign language. It was a crossroads for the Levins. This is where the source of Jordan's drive, persistence, insistence becomes obvious: his parents. Probably more his dad. His mom brings the calm, the balance.

"Both of us have personalities," Marty said, "that we don't always do what people tell us to do."

Going the sign-language route seemed like it would wall Jordan off permanently.

"We realized it limits you to being able to communicate with other people who know sign language," Marty said.

Instead, they chose a technique called "Learning to Listen." With the best hearing aids money could buy, Jordan would be able to have about 20 percent hearing. They had to teach him the other 80 percent. They had to teach Jordan every phonetic sound, every natural sound, every technological sound. They had to teach him how to use the hearing he had.

"When the phone would ring," Mollene said, "he wouldn't know what he was hearing."



In groups, Levin has the members face him so he can see their faces and read their lips.

When Jordan became old enough for elementary school, they wanted to send him to the one their house was zoned for. "Where you live," they were told, "has a terrific hearing-impaired program. Why don't you go there?"

"We're not, because we don't want to," the Levins said.

Jordan was seven years old the first time he came upon something hinting that he had been born differently than most people. Closed-captioning technology emerged, and Jordan saw it on a TV program.

What's that?

Well, that's for people who are hearing impaired, so they can watch television.

"Does that mean I am hearing impaired?" he asked.

Most of the time, raising Jordan was nearly a 24-hour job. Schoolwork took two or three times longer than with most kids. He did homework in the car on the way to hockey or baseball practice, on the way home, in the morning before school.

The Levins had a goal: Jordan would never fall behind, never miss practice or a competition because he was deaf.

When the sounds of music playing and weights clanging fill the gym, Levin leans on lip reading. His eyes do his hearing.

It was around the time that Jordan was 12, his parents said, that they realized their plan and their effort had worked. Jordan could talk to anyone.

He fit in.

Overcoming All Obstacles

Jordan went to college and got a business degree from Michigan State. He started his own marketing company. He lived in Miami with his brother for a while, but he couldn't find his calling in the working world.

About six years ago, he began doing personal training and, a few years after that, began learning more about CrossFit. He opened his first gym in his parents' garage and last year moved into his own 6,000-square-foot facility.

Even in running his gym, Jordan boosts his communication with members by turning what seems like his disadvantage into an advantage. When the sounds of music playing and weights clanging fill the gym, he leans on lip reading. His eyes do his hearing.

When he is laying out the CrossFit workout of the day, he says he simply commands attention. He makes everyone gather around him. He gets members to face him when they are asking questions. He makes eye contact with everyone.

Outside of the gym, Jordan does motivational speaking.

Well, it seems so ... I mean, someone like you ... I'm not sure how to put this, but ... motivational speaking and someone who was born ... hearing impaired ...

"Spit it out!" Jordan commands. "It's OK."

"Isn't that kind of the obvious thing?" I ask.

Too obvious, apparently.

"I was just trying to be normal, but people found out about how I became normal, and I got invited to speak more and more often," he says.

He has only once spoken to a group of the hearing impaired. He's even been publicly chastised by proponents of sign language for being deaf and not signing. He has a foundation, but not for the hearing impaired. He founded the Jordan Levin Childhood Obesity Foundation.



Passionate about helping others, Levin does motivational speaking and has started a foundation to fight childhood obesity.



Every coach needs to be a great listener.

He had noticed many government agencies talking about childhood obesity, but not much action in his part of Michigan. No one was encouraging young children to exercise and offering them a place to do it. So he does.

And now he's married. I wonder what that was like for his wife, when they started dating, how she viewed him, if she approached him differently.

"Why don't you ask her?" Jordan says. "She's right here."

Hillary's been listening in, in case he needed her to fill in a few words.

They connected through a Jewish dating website, then spoke on the phone. When he was dating, Jordan would direct a woman to his personal website, which told his back story. It was a way he didn't have to lay out everything, a shortcut. She was supposed to look at his site and think, "Wow, what a story. What a guy."

Hillary didn't bite.

"If I'm talking to him, why would I check out his website? I just thought it was a crock of shit."

Jordan, in the background on the phone now, laughs out loud. "Are you serious?"

She made him explain it the regular way. She made him be normal.

Hillary continues. She figured his deafness was no problem "as long as he could drive and take a girl out on a proper date."

She says his hearing training makes him notice everything, be alert for every sound, like "he's got eyes everywhere."

Jordan says it's because he was taught how to hear. He was taught what to listen for when he sees a fire truck go by or sees a bird chirping.

A loud, pounding sounds comes through the phone.

"If I am knocking on a table," Jordan says, "I was taught to listen for that sound."

Hillary says the only dating glitch she could even remember was that when they went to a movie, they would have to drive farther sometimes to find a theater that offered captioning.

Or that if they went out to dinner with a group of friends, a round table is better. At a rectangular table, people are side by side, and it makes it tougher for Jordan to read lips.

"She's the one who thought of that," Jordan said.

He had never noticed.



Courtesy of Lon Wagner

About the Author

Lon Wagner is director of communications for a medical-science company and a freelance writer who lives in Norfolk, Va. He spent more than two decades as a reporter and feature writer for newspapers in the Mid-Atlantic, and his stories won national awards in several top feature-writing competitions. His series about a Navy pilot downed during the first Gulf War was nominated by his newspaper for the Pulitzer Prize. He and his wife have three daughters.