



Plugged In is inspired by life

By Douglas L. Beck



When Kimberly's 6-month-old daughter, McKenna, was diagnosed with bilateral, moderately severe sensorineural hearing impairment, Kimberly's reaction was unusual—and it wasn't because she's a pediatrician. "I wasn't devastated or surprised. I was inspired!" Kimberly's inspiration came from her husband, Pete McEachen, whom she describes as "a spectacular person."

Indeed, Pete is an accomplished toy designer and cartoonist, who has been designing toys at The Little Tikes Company since earning his BFA from the Cleveland Institute of Art. But there's much more to his story than his artistic abilities.

Pete's bilateral, moderately severe sensorineural hearing loss was not diagnosed until age 4. At that time, his speech sounds were mostly grunts, occasionally accompanied by hand signals. The doctors told his mother Pete's lack of speech development was due to a developmental delay or perhaps a lack of intelligence.

Fortunately, due to his mother's intuition and persistence, he finally had a hearing test. After being fitted with appropriate hearing aids, Pete's world changed dramatically. He went through intensive aural rehabilitation and speech-language therapy to correct and improve his speech while attending an oral-deaf school. He was a fast learner! After only one year, he was mainstreamed into the public school system. He excelled in academics and played in his high school marching band, all the while nurturing his drawing abilities.

For the last few years, Pete has been watching McKenna evolve into her own person while rekindling memories of his

own childhood experiences. This has inspired the new comic strip he created called *Plugged In*, which portrays the everyday adventures of Thomas (an 11-year-old boy with hearing loss) and his BFF (Best Friend Forever), Vinton.

"Ideas for the strip come from everywhere," Pete notes. "A childhood memory, something silly my kids do, the daily news, office chatter, or even my own everyday mishaps and struggles. Thomas is an extension of my life experiences, past and present."

The characters in the strip are named for prominent historical figures with hearing loss or deafness. For example, Thomas was named for Thomas Edison. Vinton, who's actually more of a personal digital assistant (PDA) than a person, was named for Vinton Cerf, co-inventor of the Internet, while Juliette is for Juliette Low, founder of the Girl Scouts.

Pete noted one major advantage to his own hearing loss, which Thomas sometimes takes pleasure in, too. Specifically, "quietness" seems to follow him around. In fact, when he prefers quiet, all he has to do is turn off his hearing aids.

In the foreword of *Plugged In*, Kimberly wrote, "As you read these strips, I hope that you will see that everyone has their own perspective in life. We all have our own abilities and disabilities. Being able to find humor in our own shortcomings helps us all move through life. I hope that Pete's strips will be an inspiration for you. He is one of my inspirations. Now, I've got another one. And she has yet to fail any other tests..."

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Note: *Volume 1 of Plugged-In: The Everyday Adventures of Thomas and his BFF, Vinton* was published in October 2009 and is available exclusively from Oticon Pediatrics. The 40-page book will be included with all new Oticon Pediatrics hearing instruments for children ages 5-18. Copies of the book are available for \$5.99 each. Three more volumes are scheduled for release through Oticon Pediatrics. Contact peditrics@oticonusa.com for more information.