



# 1 FIRSTS

Remember your first day of school?  
Your first job? Your first crush? Your first broken heart?  
On the next 13 pages, writers, celebs, and a few extraordinary  
ordinary people tell the stories of all kinds of milestone  
moments in their lives. How did Cybill Shepherd handle her first  
lesbian love scene? (With gusto.) What did Colin Powell  
do on his first day off? (It involved a wrench.) And just how  
disastrous was Anthony Bourdain's first cooking disaster?  
(See how bad things can get, at right.)

## My First Sounds

**ELLEN ROTH** ::  
deaf for 41 years, recipient of  
cochlear implants at age 43

I GREW UP IN NEW York City, and on September 11 I was living with my sister about five blocks from the World Trade Center. We saw the towers get hit, we saw people jumping, we saw people covered with all that white ash. And everywhere we went, everyone was talking, and I couldn't hear their reactions, and that made me so angry. No one wanted to make the effort to talk to me because there was too much going on. My sister felt part of things, though. I didn't like that.

One day she said, "Why don't you get a cochlear implant?" I thought she was teasing, but she wasn't. Time went on, and I continued to think about it. And a year after 9/11, I got the implants.

Being able to hear was very odd at first. Everything sounded like computers, or robots, and I thought there must have been some mistake. For a year, my audiologist made adjustments. It was like I was a baby. I was hearing everything, but it made no sense. I had to learn what speech sounded like.

The first time I heard music, I cried. All my life, hearing people had told me

they couldn't live without music. So I went to Tower Records, put on a pair of headphones, and listened to the Red Hot Chili Peppers. It was pretty awesome. I just listened again and again. Then hip-hop, electronica, jazz, classical, rock 'n' roll, country! I spent four hours there. I didn't want to leave.

I had a dog, a certified hearing dog. When someone came to the door or called my name, he would alert me. His name was Hurray. At the age of 13, he became deaf himself. He was a toy poodle, about ten pounds, very portable. He

was my dog for 17½ years, and he passed away two years ago. Anyway, after the implants, I heard Hurray for the first time. It turned out he had three different barks: one when I got home, when he was excited; the second when he had to go to the bathroom; the third when I was leaving—he was depressed! He didn't want me to leave!

I discovered that he snored when he slept on my lap.

Before the implants, when I walked Hurray, I would of course see people. Now I could hear them say "Good morning." I thought, *Oh, they talk to me!*

The device  
that changed  
Roth's life.



And I realized that was probably why people used to be so stone-faced with me—they must have thought I was ignoring them. Now it's so precious to be able to connect.

On the other hand, the big thing I realized is that people talk too much! All day long, they talk about nothing!

Little things surprised me, too. A person breathing hard makes a sound. In my apartment, I can hear the woman upstairs walking around. When I cook, I can hear the sauce bubbling, the toaster popping up. And I've stopped slurping soup. I have deaf friends, and I can hear the sounds they make when they eat; it's like, *Okay, guys, you're making some noise here....*

Not long after getting the implants, while driving my car, I heard this *eeeeee* sound. It cost me \$30 to have the brake pads changed. I told the mechanic, "You know, I had to pay a lot more before." And he said, "You destroyed your rotors, that's why." I guess deaf people lose out a lot on that brake-pad warranty.

At the time I got the implants, I also went back to school. For ten years, I'd been a vocational rehabilitation administrator. Now I'm a rabbinical student and a senior vice president at a company that produces videos using American Sign Language. I want to become a Kabbalah counselor. I want to understand everything.

## My First Day of Freedom

DENNIS MAHER **■** *innocent man, exonerated after 19 years in prison*

I WAS SENTENCED TO LIFE IN prison for three sexual assaults I didn't commit, and I served 19 years, two months, and 29 days. Not that I counted.

On April 1—April Fool's Day—2003, I got the word that I was going to be released. Unbelievable. Aliza, my lawyer, called and said, "When do you want to go home? You can go tomorrow if you want."

I said, "Let's make it April 3." I wanted my family to have time to adjust. Plus I wanted time to say goodbye. I'd been with some of these guys 17 years. I had made a lot of friends.

I started crying and got all emotional. I had come to the conclusion I was going to die in prison. When I called my mother, she said, "I'll believe it when I see it."

I remember going out in the yard to walk—thinking how, on the outside, I'd be able to walk in straight lines instead of squares or circles. Having to wait for cars to go by, dealing with the hustle and bustle of people—I was looking forward to it.

In prison I ran the staff kitchen, and later that day the cops were saying, "What are we going to eat now?" The whole staff was glad I was leaving. Quite a few of them believed I was innocent.

The night before I got out, my friends and I went up to the prison library to sit and say our goodbyes. These were all hardened criminals, and they were crying. Some of them I worked with, some I lifted weights with. Everyone knew my story.

On April 3, the guards woke me up at 5 A.M. I was strip-searched, then I changed into a suit. Of course we got stuck in the beautiful Boston traffic on our way to the courthouse. As we pulled up, I could see the camera crews. I thought, *All those crews are for me.* They took me to a holding cell, and my lawyer came in and said, "Are you ready?" I started crying again. It was something I never thought would happen and here it is staring me in the face.

In the courtroom, my mom didn't recognize me. She hadn't seen me in a suit in 19 years. I was clean-shaven. I still had chains on my ankles and wrists, but I looked good. The guards took off the chains, and I hugged my parents and my lawyer. Then J.W. Carney, the man who had prosecuted me 19 years earlier, asked



to speak with me. He said, "I'm sorry, Dennis. I did not know." He said, "Can you forgive me?" I said, "I forgive you, Jay." He had the guts to step forward and apologize. And he still gets picked on for it. I was one of the first exonerees to get a face-to-face apology—which went a long way toward helping me get through this.

They had a reception for me in the attorney's office—Brie cheese and all this food I had never eaten. And then we drove to Lowell, which is where I was arrested and where my parents live. There was a new train station, new parks, new bridges. The whole face of the city had changed. My parents lived in a different place now and had set up a cot for me.

I was 42 years old, and my mother joked, "You're grounded." But for the next week or two, I went out and walked in a different direction every day, just exploring. On my way back to the house, I'd stop at McDonald's to get an Egg McMuffin. That was the only thing that was the same.

I went to renew my driver's license. I gave them my old license, and the clerk said, "You've got a speeding ticket from ten years ago." I said, "I just got out of prison yesterday after 19 years, two months, and 29 days. There's no way."

My Sears credit card still worked. That really freaked me out.

When I was arrested, I was a soldier. I

had planned on doing 20 years in the military, but I ended up doing almost 20 years in prison. I was a defender of freedom, and they took my freedom away.

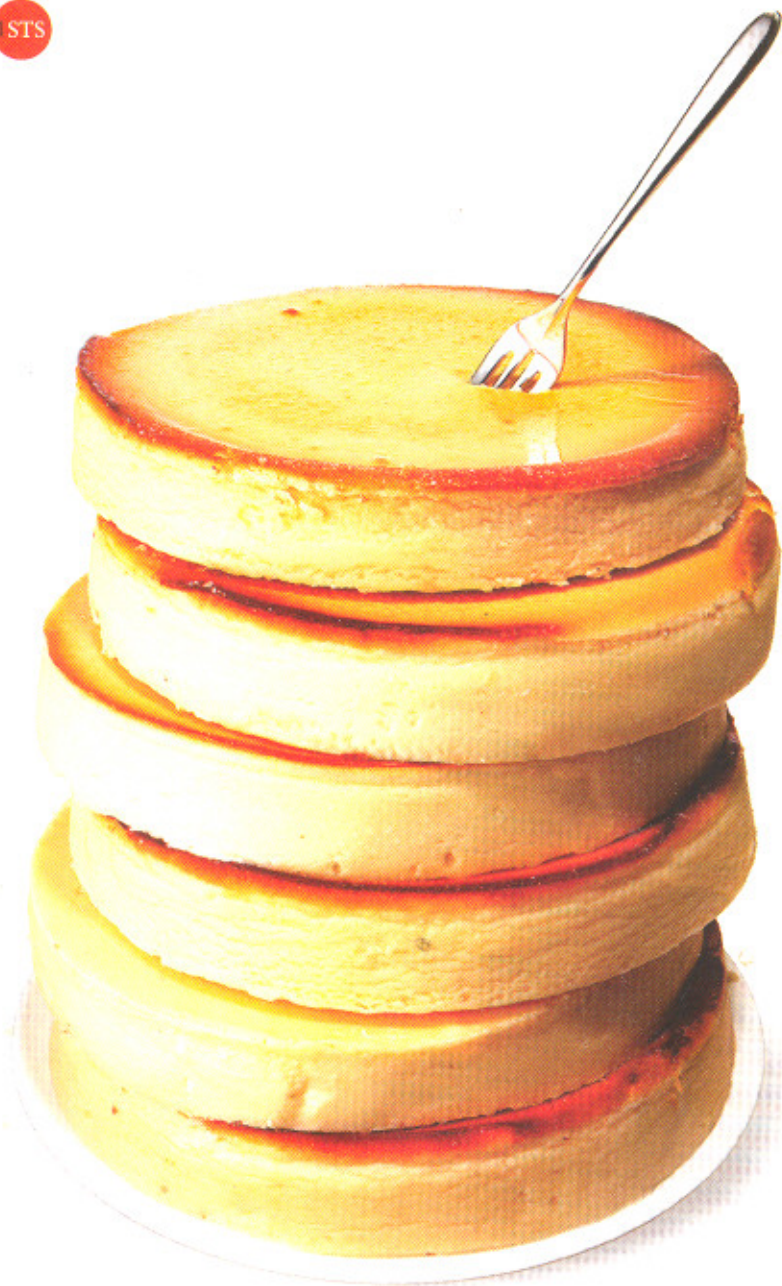
In prison I had to be in a treatment program for sexually dangerous people because I had denied my "crimes." I had a hard time with the program. I had to deal with sex offenders talking about what they did, and therapists who said I was in denial. As part of the program, you were supposed to write a release plan. I told the

woman who was leading the group, "My plan is I'll get released through DNA testing, take two months off, find a job"—which I did; I got hired as a mechanic for a waste

management company—"meet a woman and get married and have children." And that's what happened.

I knew the DNA was not going to match; I just didn't know when the results were going to come. I'd fought the bureaucracy for years trying to get the DNA tested, but the judge wouldn't release the evidence. The day the judge retired, I called the Innocence Project in New York, which referred me to the New England Innocence Project. Those were the first lawyers who ever took my case. Aliza Kaplan was the lawyer who got me out. My daughter is 11 months old now, and her name is Aliza Maher. ●

**Maheer and his daughter, Aliza, at home in Massachusetts.**



## My First 11 Pounds of Cheesecake (in 9 Minutes)

SONYA THOMAS :: 105-lb. competitive eater; world record holder in cheesecake, deep-fried okra, hard-boiled eggs, fruitcake, and 17 other foods

WITH CHEESECAKE YOU don't need to practice—you just swallow. It goes down smooth. It's not like hot dogs. A hot dog, you have to chew. You have to use your teeth.

The competition where I set the record was the first time I'd ever eaten more than a forkful of cheesecake. People said it was good with coffee, so I washed it down with four 16-ounce cups with cream and Equal. They gave us small forks,

but that was too slow, so I started using my hands. You cannot eat cheesecake fast with your hands, though; it's too messy. I thought, *Oh God, no. I've got to change my technique.* Then they gave me a big spoon, and I switched to scooping, which was better.

Enjoying the cheesecake is when you eat about four to six pounds. It's *goood*. Then later you're not enjoying it. The next day was not so good.