

Hi, I'm Emily Ochojski and I am very excited to finally become part of the Cleft Pals NSW team. I'm 25 years old and live in Gymea, in the Sutherland Shire of Sydney. I have grown up as the eldest of three girls (much to my father's delight!) and, after completing High School, I embarked on a journey of bar work and travelling before coming home and finally finding my "place" working in a Child Care Centre in the city, whilst studying a degree in Early Childhood Teaching.

Despite all the "normality" I have had in my life, there has always been that other little thing in the background – the tiny fact that I was born with a unilateral Cleft Lip and Palate. Many of you who are reading this article probably have a young child with a cleft palate or possibly a family member or friend, and it is for you that – on behalf of Cleft Pals – I have decided to share my own experiences for, as well as offer a little insight into the world of *having* a cleft and what this could mean for you and your future. I am not a doctor, a surgeon, or a specialist. I just wanted to tell you *my* story to help you feel at ease about the situation and show you that it is not the end of the world, as I turned out perfectly happy and healthy!

I don't remember many of my earlier procedures. The palate repair, the lip repair, the several sets of grommets, the speech therapy – I barely know anything about. The first time I remember being in hospital is when I had a Bone Marrow Transplant from my hip into my gum when I was 11 years old so that - with further orthodontic treatment - this gap could be filled with my teeth. It was after this that paying regular visits to my Orthodontist at Randwick Hospital became a part of life for me. Jaw expanders, and later braces, were all fitted to help close the gap in my gum, correct my bite and restructure my face. Around the end of 2004, at the age of 16, I had a meeting at the hospital with about five different surgeons. It was at this meeting that I was faced with the unwanted decision of whether to have further orthodontic treatment *or* jaw surgery to bring my nose and my cheekbones forward and create a more "normal" facial structure. After much deliberation with experts and family, it was decided that the surgical option (although a more daunting process) would be more reliable and give a more definite result.

My Jaw Surgery at the end of 2005 was probably one of the toughest experiences I have had to endure. My top jaw was moved forward in order to bring more structure to my face and aid further correction to my nose. I started off in intensive care and spent almost a week in hospital. My jaws were held shut with rubber bands and I was on a diet of only liquids and mushy foods for 2-3 months (over Christmas!!). Although these months seemed like forever, I finally saw the light at the end and am still, to this day, incredibly proud of myself for withstanding such an ordeal and am very happy with the result. The following two years saw the long awaited removal of my braces, (just in time for my Year 12 Graduation!), and another two minor surgeries in 2006 and 2007 to help correct and lift my nose.

I am sure that as a parent, throughout the years, you will probably go through concern and worry in wondering if your child is okay emotionally – both with their appearance and any challenges that they may be facing. I know this for a fact, as my parents for years, asked me almost on a daily basis if I was okay. It wasn't always easy and I remember being teased a couple of times in Primary School and feeling self-conscious throughout my early High School years. But let's face it – nobody finds those teenage years easy anyway!! One thing that always helped me was to be open and honest to everyone and answer questions in a positive way – and besides, telling my friends I was fed as a baby with a "Lamb's Bottle" was always a winning story to tell! By holding my head high and remaining optimistic, I found that some of my friends - to my surprise - began looking up to me. One of my best friends wrote about me once in a school project –

"Emily is one of my dearest friends. She is beautiful inside and out and she is my pillar of strength. I look up to her because all her life she has faced the challenge of having a cleft palate but although she has had to deal with feeling self-conscious, she is one of the most confident teenage girls I know and one day I hope to be able to cope with my life challenges as well as her."

Although I have always put on a brave face for my parents, it is only now, years later that I can honestly say: yes, having a Cleft Palate has definitely thrown many complicated challenges at me in my life, and yes at times in the past it *has* got me down. But now that the haze of dramatic teenage years and insecurities has lifted, I know that this experience has definitely taught me a lot about life – to be patient, always acknowledge the good things in life – after all, there *are* worse things than having a Cleft! – And to always appreciate family and friends who go along for the bumpy ride with you.

After having come to the end of that particular "bumpy ride", I would like to pay a small tribute to my parents and many other families out there who are going through the same thing –

Thank you for holding my hand every step of the way and never letting go. It was an equally difficult journey for you too, and I would not be who I am today without you and your never ending love and support.

To all of you who are reading this:
I hope that my story is able to help you in some way, no matter who you are. I am excited to be involved and hope to be some kind of support, inspiration or hope for those of you who may need it.

