



Roxbury twins Erin and Riley Kovalcik, 9, show their new, blue and green hearing aids that were sent to them in honor of their allegiance to the Seattle Seahawks Monday. KAREN FUCITO/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD

A letter, a tweet, a special bond

NFL fullback moved by Morris girl's note

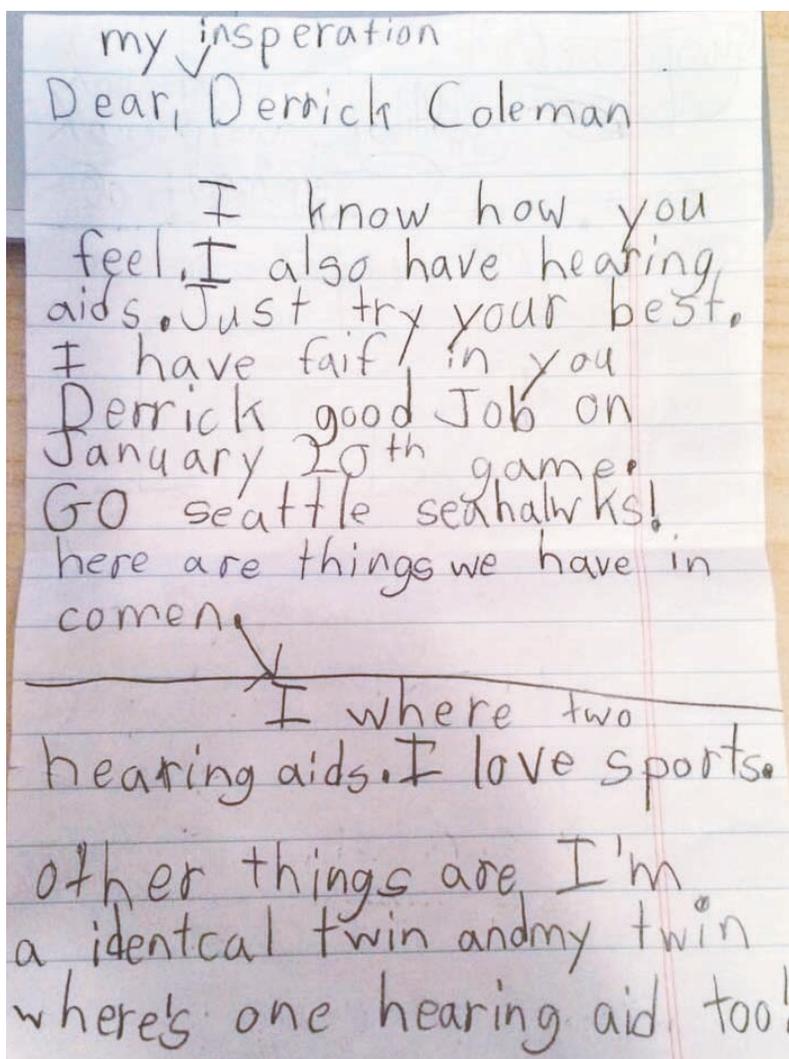
By Jane Havsy
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Riley Kovalcik became a Seattle Seahawks fan not long before they won the AFC Championship game, but not because of anything she saw on the football field.

Kovalcik, a 9-year-old from Roxbury, has been deaf for almost all of her life. She supports the Seahawks because of fullback Derrick Coleman, whose own hearing loss was revealed to the world in a 60-second Duracell commercial which began airing not long before that game.

The ad shows Coleman, who became deaf at age 3, playing football but having trouble communicating with his coach, and being teased by other kids. He is be-

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Riley Kovalcik's letter to Seattle Seahawks fullback Derrick Coleman (left), who, like Riley, is deaf. PHOTO COURTESY OF JAKE KOVALCIK (ABOVE)/FILE PHOTO (LEFT)

LETTER

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lieved to be the first legally deaf offensive player in the National Football League.

The final shot captures Coleman running down the tunnel into a packed stadium, and the tag line, "Trust the power within." It has more than 12 million YouTube hits.

After the Kovalcik family — Riley, her identical twin sister Erin, 5-year-old brother Aiden, and parents Jake and Tracy — watched the Seahawks defeat the San Francisco 49ers to reach Super Bowl XLVIII, Riley asked if she could write a letter to Coleman.

"I wanted to tell him he's done really good in football, even if he is deaf, and even if he can't hear them on the field," said Riley, a cuddly blonde who has needed hearing aids in both ears since she was 1.

"I told him I know how he feels, because I'm also deaf. I have two hearing aids, and I was also bullied. My life isn't that much different than his."

Added Erin, "If it's just about batteries, it doesn't matter. We saw something different. It's about someone's life."

Jake Kovalcik couldn't mail Riley's letter on Monday morning, because post offices were closed in observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Social media seemed to be a quicker option, but Kovalcik couldn't find an account for Coleman on Sunday. He created one a couple of days after the Seahawks made it to the Super Bowl.

Coleman's response — a photograph of his handwritten note — was the eighth Tweet he'd ever sent out, just before a walkthrough at the Seahawks' practice facility on Jan. 22.

"She wasn't asking for anything, not an autograph, not anything," he said six days later at Media Day at the Prudential Center in Newark.

"She was just saying she has faith in me, and hopes I succeed in whatever I do. That touched my heart and made me feel warm. ... She's just like me. It's almost the exact same thing I tell other people, that we're all the same. Everybody has problems. If I can go out there and be on an NFL team, and play in the Super Bowl, the sky's the limit."

Outreach and influence

Riley's letter and Coleman's response went viral, and have been retweeted thousands of times since Kovalcik first posted it on Jan. 21.

The girls have appeared on "Good Morning, America," "Fox and Friends," and CBS news both locally and nationally. They spoke to Diane Sawyer via Skype, and dozens of other TV shows, newspapers and websites



Erin and Riley Kovalcik, 9, and the letter that Riley wrote to Seattle Seahawks fullback Derrick Coleman. KAREN FUCITO/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD

ONLINE

Go to DailyRecord.com for a video and to read Derrick Coleman's reply to Riley Kovalcik.

have reached out to Jake Kovalcik — many of them also via Twitter.

Coleman has also become a hero to many students in the Lake Drive program for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in Mountain Lakes. Jimmy Henriquez, a Mountain Lakes sophomore who played cornerback and halfback for the Herd this fall, didn't believe the commercial was real when it first began circulating. A newly minted Seahawks fan, Henriquez saw online video of Coleman scoring his first NFL touchdown against New Orleans, and began to dream of his own future on-field heroics.

Henriquez communicates using sign language, and usually relies on an interpreter to voice his thoughts to the Herd coaches, whether it's football, basketball or track season.

"All the guys were running over and happy, and they were giving him props for that. It was really good, he said, fingers flying as Wendy Ehrhardt interpreted. "I wish, I dream, maybe Derrick Coleman would come to one of our football games. That would be so cool."

Seattle's super fans

Riley and Erin received matching Seahawks jerseys bearing the name and number of outspoken cornerback Richard Sherman. They're hoping to wear them to the Super Bowl at MetLife Stadium on Sunday — or at least to a family friend's party.

"If I wasn't actually living this, I would honestly think I was a ridiculous liar," said Jake Kovalcik, a Boonton Township native who works in sales for MapMyFitness.com. "My entire motivation for this was just to let Derrick Coleman know he has given my kids somebody to look up to and somebody they can relate to. He reaffirmed what we have always told our girls, 'Just because you have hearing aids, that's what makes you different. That

doesn't limit you at all.'"

Coleman still doesn't know why he lost his hearing, which he described as "a two or three (out of 10) without my hearing aids," and a "seven or eight, depending on what day it is," while wearing them. Riley and Erin were diagnosed with large vestibular aqueduct syndrome (LVAS), which usually causes vertigo and balance-related issues as well as deafness. Riley was believed to be "utterly and profoundly deaf (with) zero measurable hearing" not long after her first birthday, Jake Kovalcik said. But a few months later, he called out to his wife, and Riley turned around. The Kovalciks tried their impromptu experiment for a couple of weeks before calling an audiologist.

Riley could hear, though no one has been able to determine why. She still needed two hearing aids, and Erin got her first when she was 3 years old. Both play basketball, soccer, softball and lacrosse, bouncing between sports and seasons with aplomb.

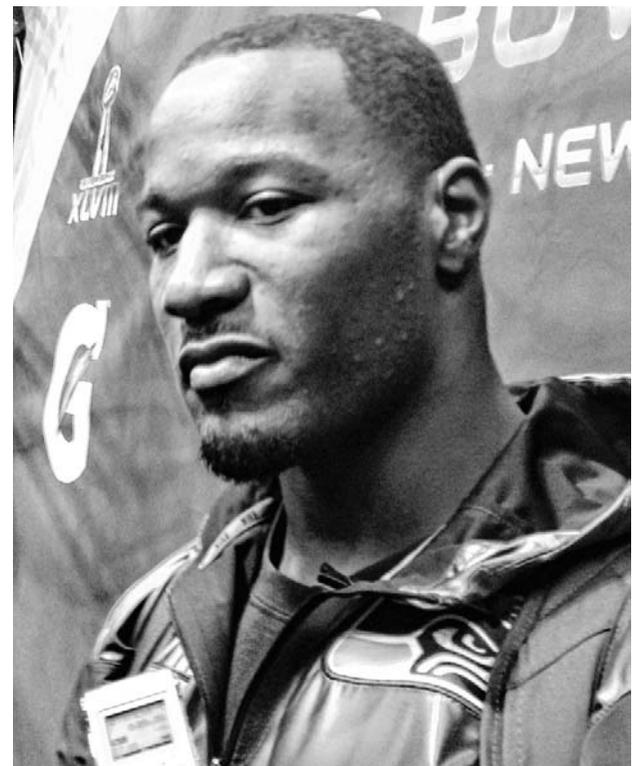
"They told me it couldn't be done, but (hearing aids) worked for me too," Riley said. "They told me I couldn't play sports. They told me even my hearing couldn't be fixed. ... I wasn't expecting to do all this. I only thought it would get to Derrick. I only expected it to get to him, that's all."

Coleman, who wears hearing aids in both ears, sometimes relies on lip-reading, particularly on the football field. Seattle running backs coach Sherman Smith said he treats Coleman "like there is no handicap," and even jokes about his ability to pick up conversations visually — or how he flinches from an official's whistle. Coleman himself commented that coaches hide their mouths when they call plays "because of people like me." He adapted just as well to the crowds of reporters surrounding him at Media Day, calling out questions from all directions.

"He's an extraordinary person," Seattle head coach Pete Carroll said. "He has demonstrated to others who have that kind of issue how far you can take it, and what you can do, and how there are no

boundaries."

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Seattle Seahawks fullback Derrick Coleman pauses to listen to a question on Media Day at the Prudential Center in Newark. JANE HAVSY/STAFF PHOTO