

Confluence & Conservation

One Woman's Mission to Preserve the Stories and Culture of the Outdoors by Conserving Our Ability to Hear

BY CAL TROUT • PHOTOS COURTESY OF OTOPRO

The Delta is a landscape defined by confluence.

Countless creeks, rivers, and streams come together across its topography to form the ceaseless drainage that keeps the Father of Waters full and flowing; its terra firma usable and inhabitable.

Just as these waters form the ecosystem that supports and gives rise to the farms, industry, arts, and culture of the region, the various circumstances of Grace Gore Sturdivant's life intersect to inform her mission and provide the bedrock for her expanding business: OtoPro.

As a young girl, she was equal parts country girl bopping along at her father's heel at Oxberry Hunting Club, and a future Miss Tennessee, tracking with pride, honor, and emulating her mother's commitment to helping others as a speech pathologist. Sturdivant absorbed and learned all she could from both.

"My mom, Darlene Gore, is a very interesting, multifaceted person. She sees something that needs to be done, or something that's missing, and she seeks to fill that need. It never fails, whenever she takes the kids to Chick-fil-A, she makes a new friend sitting there talking. It just so happens that child needs some special services when it comes to speech and language—and before you know it, my mom is either doing speech therapy for that child herself or finding the best resources for that child," said Sturdivant.

So, from her own childhood, she watched and learned the importance of helping others at the same time she developed an appreciation for the science of speaking and hearing. While she learned to live a mission-focused life watching her mother, her love of the outdoors came from accompanying her father afield.

"My dad, Jay Gore, is an outdoorsman to his core. He's an Eagle Scout. He



I had never thought about what it might mean to be deaf, to be deprived of language, or to have a remarkable language (and community and culture) of one's own.

— OLIVER SACKS



OtoPro Founder, Grace Sturdivant, is passionate about preserving and protecting hearing before nerve damage and hearing loss occur.



Sturdivant, also a busy mom, is pictured here with her three daughters, Eleanor, 12, Garnett, 10, and Sykes, 5.

hunts everything. He always got us out in the woods. He was all about leaving things better than we found it. So conservation as a value was there from the beginning.”

Gore made sure to cultivate in his two daughters an appreciation for all outdoor activities, including the hunting and processing of game, even though Sturdivant wasn't too keen on the killing part of the endeavor. “He would take my sister, Meredith, out hunting, but he made sure I knew how to shoot a gun. And, I have been there while many a deer was cleaned— I became very familiar with the circle of life and the food chain,” said Sturdivant.

Listening to her father and the other members of Oxberry discuss and decide how to best manage the deer herd on their property exposed her at a very young age to the importance of conserving the resources needed to live the life they lived. Asked how this relates to the success of OtoPro, Sturdivant offered, “You know, I am the product of two driven, type A, worker-bee parents. They always encouraged us to do our best at whatever we were going to do.”

And so, from this strong, instructive,

nuclear family, she struck out to find her own way in the world at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. She had barely begun when disaster struck as her mother was diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer. The prognosis was terminal, so Sturdivant transferred to Ole Miss to be near her mother as she underwent an aggressive treatment to save her life. “I watched her go through that, facing death and coming to terms with death; but also trying everything within her power to fight.”

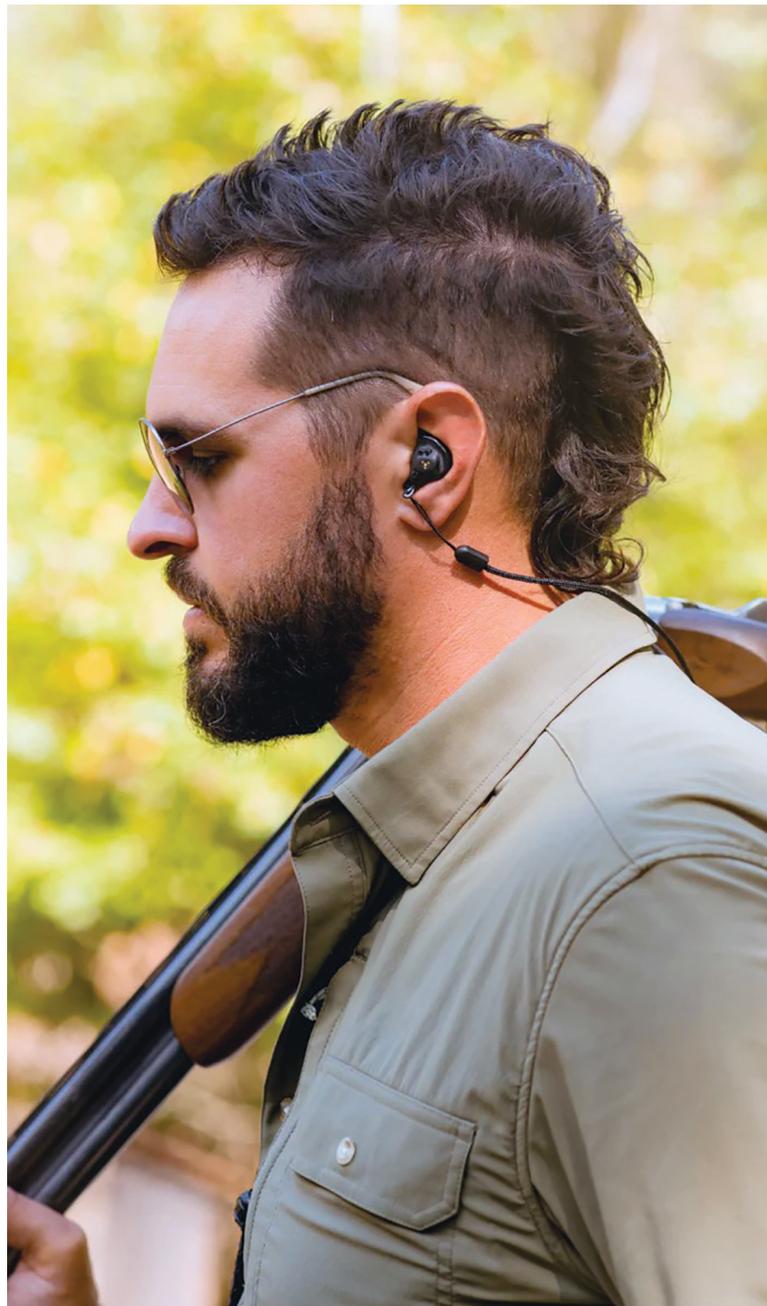
Fight she did—and she survived. “She has now written a book with my sister called *I Have Cancer. I Want to Live*,

taken from journals and prayers she wrote during treatment.” Meredith was also compelled to make sure the book made it all the way through the publication process, practically ghostwriting it for their mother. Meredith now maintains that, though she couldn't know it at the time, this was all in preparation for her own battle with with stage III melanoma.

They are both doing well now, and once Sturdivant's life calmed down, she found herself still on track with her degree at Ole Miss. While there, she had occasion to view a film of a deaf child, moments after being given cochlear



These earmuffs offer not only hearing protection, but enhanced sound quality as well, with microphones that allow for conversation without having to remove the muffs.



implants. The film documented the reaction to the first sound a six-year-old girl had ever heard—her mother saying her name. That film altered Sturdivant’s course just enough to send her in to audiology, where she found her life’s passion and work.

Armed with a new lease on the fragility of life and the importance of getting everything you can out of every minute, Sturdivant applied and was accepted to the top audiology school in the country at Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

While there, her native entrepreneurial spirit thrived. She saw a need to help families who fell in an income gap that left them uninsured for the treatment of hearing issues, so echoing her mother’s agape spirit (and with the help of both Darlene and Meredith), she started a non-profit to help them called Graceful Sounds.

Upon this platform Sturdivant entered the Miss Tennessee pageant and won, which required her to take a year off from school to work. She credits this experience with helping her learn nearly every skill needed to successfully navigate a startup with an international upside. “It was the first time I worked where I was actually a brand unto myself. I worked for the governor of Tennessee and had to do five speeches a day and travel all that year representing the state.”

After returning to Vanderbilt the following year to finish her degree, Sturdivant returned to her native Mississippi joining the



Custom-made to fit from individual ear impressions, OtoPro’s earplugs provide outstanding noise protection.

faculty at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in 2011. She was eventually named to the position of Vice Chief of Audiology. She focused on emerging research that showed a negative symbiotic relationship between dementia and hearing loss. Johns Hopkins University later pegged Sturdivant to support UMMC on a research project that studied whether or not early diagnosis and treatment with hearing aids could delay the onset, or slow the progression, of dementia. She immersed herself in research, and all the implications that were rising to the top the more she worked.

One night, at dinner with friends, Sturdivant was telling them about her work when a man at the table spoke up about the need for hearing protection for hunters at his camp. She encouraged him to have them make an appointment with her so she could take molds of their ears and get them customized hearing protection. He asseverated that *none* of them would take away from their time off spent at hunting camp to go to a clinic; but if she came to them, they would line up.

“That was on a Friday,” said Sturdivant. “My husband, Micajah, and I went home that night and started planning. By Monday morning we had filed an LLC, and by the end of the next week, we had a website.”

Aside from eliminating the need for patients to travel to a clinic by coming to them to create bespoke ear protection, Sturdivant based her model on a unique idea in the field of audiology. OtoPro is centered on the principle that, instead of waiting for someone to have hearing loss, then treating it with expensive hearing aids, the goal should be prevention of the loss in the first place with hearing protection for a fraction of the price.

And so, in 2018, OtoPro was born, and at first slowly, but then quite rapidly began to grow. What began as a side hustle to help friends and family, but then through one person hearing about “this audiologist who makes house calls” telling another, and so on, the business took off.

Emanating from the most innate of ideas: that human culture begins and ends with the telling and hearing of stories, Sturdivant set out to preserve our ability to hear them. As most Mississippians know, the best stories occur in the outdoors and are told hunter

to hunter, angler to angler, outdoorsman to outdoorsman.

Human interaction, then, is built into the DNA of the company. There will never be an AI voiceover at OtoPro Sturdivant assures, “We are not going to automate to the point that you’re not talking to a real person if you call us.”

Sturdivant considers the business as a concierge for those seeking hearing protection. She wants it to essentially be a customer service company, that no matter how large it becomes, will always feel small to her customers.

One major focal point of service at the heart of OtoPro’s values is the Jackson, Mississippi-based Magnolia Speech School, a pioneering educational center that provides the latest in techniques and technology for children with speech and language disorders.

“In 2020, I joined the board of directors for Magnolia Speech School and adopted this special-purpose school as OtoPro’s most significant charitable cause. Through our involvement we have a front-row seat to the impact this unique Mississippi asset has on students who come from all over the country. By

providing critical early resources to facilitate literacy and spoken language, children can go on to live lives unhindered by the communication and hearing challenges present at birth. It has been incredibly rewarding.”

Though it uses modern technology to ward off and correct problems, OtoPro remains devoted to the universal idea that people take care of people best. So much so, in fact, that OtoPro now contracts with nearly four hundred clinics all over globe. Each one is carefully vetted to make sure that with each transaction, OtoPro’s core values remain inviolate.

At the center of Sturdivant’s vision, community is born out of the confluence of positive human interaction.

Conservation is best achieved as a community endeavor. When the two come together a beautiful story arises and needs to be told. And with the help of Sturdivant and OtoPro, we will all be able to hear it. **DU**



Out with the old: With bluetooth pairing and streaming capabilities, these rechargeable hearing aids need no batteries and offer many additional features.