



Photos courtesy of Emma Faye Rudkin

Boerne resident Emma Faye Rudkin, herself hearing impaired, is taking her message to aid the silent across the country. The 23-year-old started a nonprofit organization, and she uses the Internet, social media and personal appearances to spread the word.

A message worth hearing

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Boerne's Emma Faye Rudkin has a message for the world to hear, and she has dedicated her life to making sure as many people as possible listen.

Rudkin, who currently has about a 90 percent hearing loss, is founder of Aid the Silent, a nonprofit organization that helps economically disadvantaged deaf and hard-of-hearing children and teenagers reach their full potential by providing funding for much-needed hearing aids and resources. She started the organization in 2015.

Her work has made Rudkin a finalist in the national 2019 Oticon Focus on People Awards which "recognize exceptional people with hearing loss who have made an impact on the hearing-impaired community."

Oticon is a hearing aid manufacturer based in Copenhagen, Denmark.

She is one of three finalists in the advocacy category, which honors hearing-impaired individuals of all ages



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Emma Faye Rudkin

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who are actively involved in advocacy or support efforts that benefit individuals with hearing loss.

Rudkin suffered through a partial hearing loss at age 3 that has increased over time to a profound level.

"I grew up thinking my voice didn't matter," the now 23-year-old Rudkin told The Star. "I thought my life had no purpose. I was desperate and desperate for help."

She said she learned how to talk properly by observing the positioning of her mouth in a mirror and by placing her hands in front of her therapist's mouth to feel the vibrations produced by certain sounds.

"My speech is the result of 10 years of therapy," she said on her website. "My articulation has a distinct sound. Many ask if I am foreign. It's a different accent they just can't place."

She said lip reading is her main source of communication.

The Turning Point

At age 14, while a student at the Geneva School of Boerne, she attended a Christian camp that changed everything.

"I started to really follow Jesus and I learned all of my pain could be used for good," she said. "I came home a different person. All of a sudden, I was full of life. I knew my hearing loss was how God was going to use me."

At age 16, Rudkin got involved with the Boerne chapter of Young Life, an organization with a mission to introduce adolescents to Jesus Christ and help them grow their faith.

"I started to share my story," she said. "I learned how to really follow Jesus and pursue my dreams."

One of those dreams was to become Miss America and use the title and platform to help others with the same disability she battles.

"I wanted to be like Heather Whitestone, the first deaf Miss America," Rudkin said.

Whitestone earned the crown in 1995.

The Beginning

In 2015, Rudkin's mother entered her in the Miss San Antonio pageant.

"I went to a meeting about it," she said, adding that at the time she did not have much confidence about having any success.

"But I heard about getting scholarships, having a platform and using organizations to help others. A light bulb went off. I knew this was God's plan."

Three months before the pageant, Rudkin created the Aid the Silent webpage.

She then won the Miss San Antonio title and later placed in the top 10 in the Miss



To vote for Rudkin:
Visit www.Oticon.com/FOP.
The deadline is Sept. 26.

Texas Pageant.

"I created a platform of giving a voice to the voiceless," she said. "I wanted to help with the basic needs of deaf children."

Rudkin said that "almost overnight" word spread across the country that a deaf woman had won the Miss San Antonio title.

"I instantly became this role model," she said. "I had this organization and platform and all of a sudden people were connecting to my story."

So, Rudkin created a social media campaign titled "Show Your Aids" and it went viral. Information on her website states the campaign was created to encourage the deaf and hard of hearing to be proud of who they are.

The campaign inspired tens of thousands of people worldwide to post their hearing aids and implants on social media, information from Oticon stated.

"That gave us a donor base," Rudkin said. "It helped us with Aid the Silent in supporting the needs of all lower-income deaf children and teens around the world."

Rudkin said she became known as the Hearing Aid Fairy.

"We were advocating for deaf children and raising awareness," she said. "We were looking for support. We wanted to educate individuals and the corporate world about the deaf and teach the deaf how to belong."

"It was all being done totally by the grace of God."

Next Steps

In 2017, after the required one year waiting period, Rudkin again was a contestant in the Miss San Antonio Pageant.

And, she again won and this time was the fourth runner up in the Miss Texas Pageant.

"I was so close to going to Miss America," she said.

However, she was the first woman since 1923 to win the Miss San Antonio crown twice.

"The second time around opened even more doors to more things," she said. "I was able to take my story and my platform to the next level."

Rudkin was named San Antonio's Woman of the Year in the 2018 class of 40 under 40 honorees celebrating the city's rising stars.

Now, her nonprofit organization operates with a \$500,000 annual budget financed mainly through grants and donations. And, it keeps Rudkin in a fast-forward mode.

"I have energy like the Energizer Bunny," she said. "I just keep going."

The Contest

Oticon stated its advocacy finalists "share an optimism and a 'can-do' attitude that inspires and motivates, whether they are trying to change public attitudes or just one person's life."

To win the award, Rudkin must earn the most votes in her category by Sept. 26. People can vote, or obtain more information about the awards, by visiting www.Oticon.com/FOP.

Today, she travels around the country sharing her story and letting others know about the programs Aid the Silent offers to the deaf and hard of hearing community.

She sings and plays four instruments – guitar, ukulele, piano and kick drum.

Three other categories also have three nominations for national awards. Winners in each category will receive prizes and national recognition that helps create awareness and open doors for the opportunity for all people with hearing loss, information from Oticon states.

Now in its 21st year, the Focus on People Awards program is a central part of Oticon's mission to raise awareness and increase opportunities for people with all levels of hearing loss. The awards recognize outstanding individuals for challenging the status quo and showing that hearing loss does not limit a person's ability to succeed.

"From accomplished adults and determined students to exceptional hearing care professionals, this year's Focus on People finalists have overcome stereotypes about hearing loss and have made a positive impact on their communities," information from the company stated.

The other advocacy group finalists are Kerry Cerra, of Coral Springs, Florida, and Max Chartrand, of Casa Grande, Arizona.

"Each year, we're amazed by the resilience, determination, and selflessness of the applicants for our Focus on People Awards program," said Nancy Palmere, director of Consumer Marketing and Public Relations for Oticon Inc. "These 12 finalists especially stand out as trailblazers in the hearing loss and professional hearing care communities. Each one is tearing down walls and proving that a condition like hearing loss does not inhibit their ability to make a difference."

Online voting for the Focus on People Awards is open through Sept. 26, 2019, and winners will be announced in November. First-place winners in each category receive a donation to the charity of their choice, and winners in

the Student, Adult, and Advocacy categories receive a pair of Oticon BrainHearing hearing aids. All finalists receive a cash prize.

Oticon is one of the most innovative hearing device manufacturers with more than 110 years of experience putting the needs of people with hearing loss first, information from the company states. Oticon has spearheaded a number of technological breakthroughs, which have made a significant difference for people with hearing loss.