

# Rachel de Azevedo Coleman

Signing for the times

By Julie Roberts

**LOCAL MUSICIAN** Rachel de Azevedo Coleman never aspired to become an entrepreneur. However, her deep involvement in her hearing-impaired child's world inspired her to create a unique set of educational videos called *Signing Time™*, enabling more deaf children — and hearing children — to learn to communicate more effectively.

When Rachel and her husband, Aaron, discovered that their 14-month-old daughter, Leah, was deaf, they immediately decided to learn everything they could about American Sign Language (ASL). Rachel's sister and her husband also taught their infant son, Alex, about ASL so he could communicate with his cousin.

persisted because they had seen the benefits for Leah and Alex. Today, says Rachel, "Lucy still can't pick up a Cheerio, but she can spell her name [using ASL]."

But while Rachel was happy with the benefits of ASL, she wasn't satisfied with the educational materials available to teach the language. She and Aaron bought numerous ASL instruction videos and books and found them all dry and boring. "For me, as a mom, it was really frustrating," Rachel explains. She wanted Leah to be able to communicate with friends, family members and the community as a whole, but she couldn't find an effective way to share the basics of ASL.

A professional singer and songwriter, Rachel decided to create her own educational video using music and colorful visuals and featuring two charming stars, Alex and Leah. One video led to another, and now there are three: *My First Signs*, *Playtime Signs* and *Everyday Signs*. Rachel has sold 30,000 videos since September 2002, and she has been pleased to discover that the videos are popular with both deaf and hearing children. "Families are now realizing that it [ASL] is a valuable parenting tool," she says.

But Rachel and the rest of the *Signing Time* team have encountered a few obstacles. Some people believe that very young children who learn ASL are less likely to develop their speech skills. Rachel disagrees. "We've seen the complete opposite situation. Kids who learn ASL know the joys of communication, so they are more likely to speak and read at earlier ages," she says.

Rachel says that more videos are forthcoming. She has also had discussions with several different media groups about making a *Signing Time* television special.

Rachel is happy to have the increased exposure; her goal

is for everyone, regardless of their hearing status, to learn at least a little bit of ASL. She believes that this will eliminate communication barriers for both deaf and hearing people. "Most of the time when people realize Leah is deaf, they are stumped. They don't know how to cross the barrier of silence. My hope is to revolutionize parenting by giving parents and their children sign language as a communication tool." ■

After six months of ASL training, both families were astonished to discover that their children communicated better than others their age. "Kids are ready to sign before they are ready to talk," Rachel explains. The parents also discovered that their children rarely had temper tantrums, because they were able to clearly communicate their wants and needs.

Rachel soon found another use for ASL when her second daughter, Lucy, was diagnosed with spina bifida and cerebral palsy. Many doctors believed that Lucy's physical limitations would prevent her from learning ASL. But Rachel and Aaron

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Rachel and daughter Lucy

DAVID STOKER