

# LADIES' HomeJournal

Roseanne Barr: She's Back!

AUGUST 2003

Sharon  
Osbourne  
& Minnie

The Secret  
to Happiness  
page 132

20-Second  
Stress Cures

MEDDLING IN-LAWS  
Stop the Madness Now!

"Honey, I  
Shrunk My  
Waistline"  
(You Can, Too)

Sharon Osbourne's  
Secret Strength

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drugs, and has a gossipy new TV talk show.  
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08>



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## Signs of Love

The two girls with the brown page-boys both love to draw. Sitting in her feeding chair at home in Salt Lake City, 3-year-old Lucy Coleman, who suffers from cerebral palsy, bangs on the tray to get her sister Leah's attention. Leah, 6, who is deaf, asks in sign language, "What color do you want?" "Purple," Lucy signs back. When Leah replaces the colored pencil in her sister's hand with the dark purple one, Lucy, gracious as always, signs "Thanks."

"They're just typical sisters," says their mother, Rachel Coleman, 28. But the fact that the girls can "converse" is nothing less than a miracle—of her own making. She had taught American Sign Language first to Leah and then Lucy, hoping that Lucy's mind, if not her body, was intact. Coleman's instincts were right: She discovered her disabled daughters not only could communicate with each other, but the world, and that sign language could benefit healthy children as well. "It's the most incredible thing watching the girls," she says. "There's a feeling in your heart that's indescribable."

Back in early 1998, when Leah was 13 months old, Coleman, a stay-at-home mom and a musician, singer and songwriter, and her husband, Aaron, 31, who was at college studying to be a city parks supervisor, were concerned that their baby had



*"Signing is a very creative process," says Coleman, with Leah (left) and Lucy.*

Rachel Coleman worried that her girls would always live in separate worlds. But a flash of insight led her to discover a way for her children to share a common language—and bond **BY CAROLYN CAMPBELL**

yet to utter a sound. Their doctor told them not to worry unless Leah didn't speak by 15 months. But the next week, when Coleman's mother asked her to call repeatedly to Leah while staying out of sight, the child never responded. "My heart sank," says Coleman. "I realized she'd never heard a story I read or a song I sang."

Diagnosed with a profound hearing impairment, Leah began wearing

hearing aids, but still couldn't hear well enough to communicate solely through speech. Coleman gathered stacks of books and videos on sign language, taught herself the rudiments in four weeks, and began teaching Leah the words a toddler would normally be learning. (Deaf infants typically start sign language between 10 months to 12 months.)

Leah was a quick study: Within a month, she had mastered 70 signs. "She could sign 'airplane' when other kids her age would just point at one," recalls Coleman. "Instead of just whining when she was hungry, she could tell me she wanted milk or crackers." Coleman says that mothers of perfectly healthy infants who observed her and Leah "stopped me everywhere—the post office, the grocery store, the bank"—saying they, too, wanted to sign with their babies. **CONTINUED**

PHOTOS: ERIK OSTLING; HAIR AND MAKEUP: DEBRA WADE

## CHANGEMAKER

"One day we were waiting at the pharmacy when a row of five kids were staring at us," Coleman recalls. "Leah signed, 'Why are people always staring at me?' I said it was because she could do something they couldn't." Coleman began teaching American Sign Language at her church and at local pre-schools, but the demand became greater than she could handle. That's when Coleman began making her own video to teach parents and children, hearing or deaf, how to sign.

In the meantime, Coleman's sister Emilie, 32, whose son Alex was born the week that Leah was diagnosed, had immediately begun teaching him sign language so he could communicate with his cousin. "One day, when he was 9 months, Alex was crying and tugging on Emilie's shirt because he wanted to nurse," recalls Coleman. "Suddenly, he stopped, looked up at her, and signed 'milk.'" It was then that both mothers realized that babies, whose fine motor skills develop sooner than the complex muscle coordination required for speech, can sign before they can talk.

In October 1999, Coleman became pregnant, and an ultrasound at 18 weeks revealed the baby had spina bifida, a cleft in the spine that causes paralysis below the affected vertebra. Coleman decided to undergo intrauterine surgery to try to repair the damage. She raised \$15,000 with the help of neighbors, friends and family, and had the one-hour procedure when she was five months pregnant. When Lucy was born in May 2000,

the couple were overjoyed to find she could move her legs, feet and toes. "The doctors told us to take her home and treat her like a normal child, because that's what she was," says Coleman.

But by 9 months, Lucy was unable to urinate and was losing control of



Today, Lucy can sign hundreds of words and loves to chatter all day

her body. "She held her fists tight and had her head thrown back, but other than that she was like a rag doll," says Coleman. "Her legs were floppy and couldn't bear her own weight." The diagnosis was devastating: cerebral palsy. Lucy couldn't crawl or speak, and showed no emotion; a year later, doctors concluded she was also mentally retarded.

True to character, her mother was undeterred: "Though she was locked in her body," she says, "I knew Lucy was in there." In March 2002, Coleman, who had not touched her guitar since learning Leah was deaf, wrote a song, "Show Me a Sign," that was a prayer for her baby. The creative vision helped her to complete the sign-

language video she had envisioned that would be more engaging than the ones she had learned from. Coleman wrote more songs and a script with Emilie's help, and asked a former colleague with a production company to shoot the 30-minute film, *Signing Time*, which starred Leah, Alex and herself, and came out in April 2002.

A month later, Coleman was playing the video at home when she heard a small voice say, "wa-wa." She bent over Lucy's crib and watched in wonder as Lucy signed "water." Coleman soon discovered Lucy could sign all 18 words in the video, which meant both her disabled children would be able to talk to each other. "It was one of those 'Aha!' moments," she recalls. "I thought, This is going to work. We can cross this bridge."

Today, Lucy knows her ABCs and colors and can sign hundreds of words; she loves to chatter all day long with Leah and her parents. Coleman has already made two more videos, and sells some 2,500 of them a month through her own Web site, [www.signingtime.com](http://www.signingtime.com), and Amazon.com. Her husband has become a stay-at-home dad, enabling her to promote her videos at parent organizations, trade shows and conventions for the deaf. "One mom told me her daughter, who can hear perfectly, goes to sleep holding the video," Coleman says.

She and her daughters reap the blessings every day. "Which shape do you want me to draw—circle, square, star or heart?" Leah signs to Lucy. "I want a star," Lucy signs back. And Leah draws it for her. ♡