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Rachel Coleman

Started "Signing Time" For Both of Her Physically Challenged Daughters & Others.

Website(s):

<http://www.signingtime.com>

by Laura Smith Bonner
Proud Mom of Joe

Rachel Coleman comes from a long line of musicians. Her father, Lex de Azevedo, is a film composer and has been nominated for a Golden Globe, while her grandmother was one of the singing King Sisters, who appeared on the King Family Show that aired on television in the sixties. With nine brothers and sisters, Rachel grew up singing and performing, and by the time she had married and had her first child, Rachel Coleman was now not only a musician but also a mom.

To hear Coleman tell it, that's pretty much how it all started. She couldn't have arranged it, indeed had no plans other than just being a "mom"; but when at 14 months she and her husband Aaron discovered that their daughter Leah was profoundly deaf and could not hear a thing, Coleman's life changed irrevocably. She states, "once we found out she was deaf I thought, what is the point of doing music? When we first learned of her diagnosis, Aaron and I were crushed. We cried and we were distraught. What does this mean for our lives?" And then something really great happened. They stopped. And looked at their daughter and realized that nothing had changed for her. Leah was still the same beautiful, healthy little girl she had always been. They may have just gotten a diagnosis, but this was how it had always been for their child. Leah had always been deaf and she had been just fine.

At this point they knew they had to find a way to communicate with their daughter and started learning American Sign Language (ASL). Her husband was finishing up his college degree and so the family had lots of time to devote to their newfound mode of communication. It was also around this time that Coleman decided there was no longer a place for music in her life. She relates, "It seemed like such a waste of time. So I stopped and said I am not a musician. I am not a performer. I am not a songwriter - and don't ask."



A few months pass and the family is now well into their signing routine. Leah is picking it up so quickly that before long she can communicate at a much higher level than hearing peers her age. While they're still whining and pointing and saying Ma-ma and Da-da, Leah enters the scene and can sign, "Mom I would like some cheese and crackers and chocolate milk." Coleman's girlfriends began to wonder if their children should be learning this method too. For while they're left guessing what their own children needed or wanted at any given moment, Leah could come right out and tell them what it was she wanted and further knew that she was absolutely understood. It was a powerful experience for a mother as well as for Leah herself, to be two years old and capable of such clear, complete communication.



The Colemans

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Leah

Around this time, Rachel and her husband decided they were ready for another child. At this point they knew that they would be wholly prepared if they were to have another child who was deaf. However, when they went in for their ultrasound, they instead discovered they were having another daughter and Lucy was coming to them with Spina Bifida, a congenital defect in which the spinal column is imperfectly closed so that part of the spinal cord protrudes, often resulting in hydrocephalus (water on the brain) and other neurological disorders.

The Coleman's retreated to their home where again they cried and tried to figure out how they would manage this latest development. And once again they stopped and realized that this was exactly how they felt when they discovered Leah was deaf. Coleman states, "I thought back to that time and how it had all turned out and how it had moved our lives in a direction that we would never have dreamed. Let's just pretend that this is exactly like the time we found out Leah was deaf and that nothing is wrong. This is just how Lucy is and we need to educate ourselves and learn the best way to manage it."

And that's exactly what they did. Coleman went straight to the Internet where she eventually happened across information on groundbreaking fetal surgery for Spina Bifida that was being performed in Tennessee. Although they could not pay their rent that month, with the aid of countless donations of money, airfare, and other services, a month from the day of Lucy's diagnosis the Coleman's were in Tennessee having this innovative surgery.

Rachel was put on bed rest for the remainder of her pregnancy; however, Lucy still came 8 weeks early, and because she was so premature, she also had cerebral palsy. Coleman states, "Lucy was born and we were working to manage that and what it looked like was she just screamed all the time. She didn't laugh. She didn't smile. She didn't cry when she was hungry, she just screamed all the time. Her hands were fists, her arms stuck to her sides, she could not control her muscles and she could not develop fine motor skills. And this was just how it was to be Lucy."



Lucy

Fast forward a few years, where Leah is now four, and Coleman finds herself becoming increasingly frustrated with just how few people can actually communicate with her daughter. Besides herself and her husband, a few close family members all had acquired sufficient skills to connect with Leah, but there was a whole community out there left virtually in silence. She confides, "They would say 'we really want to communicate with her', but then I would hear all the excuses, and Coleman found that she was beginning to take it personally. The problem crystallized during one of Leah's soccer practices when Coleman overheard a little boy telling the coach that he didn't want to be Leah's partner because 'she can't talk and she can't even hear me.'" That little boy was just telling it like it was from a four-year-old point of view, and Coleman knew that this was the way it was going to be for her daughter unless she did something about it now.

Soon after, Coleman visited the pre-school that the little boy attended and volunteered to teach sign language at story time. After just a couple of weeks, the difference in these kids' reactions to Leah was phenomenal! Now they would rush right up to her and sign "play" and "friend", excited to show off what they had learned. At that point Coleman realized the import of what was happening here, but she also knew that it wasn't possible for her to teach at every pre-school.

As fate would have it, Coleman's sister Emilie picked this very time to contact Rachel with an idea for creating some videos for kids to teach them about music. Coleman responded, "That's a really good idea, but what we really need right now is sign language" and thus the roots for "Signing Time" had been planted.

It took a year for this video to be completed, whose primary intention was making sign language easy to learn and accessible for the varied people surrounding Leah's life. And right around the time the video was due to be finished, the Coleman's were dealt yet another devastating blow: Lucy's neurologist told them that he wanted to prepare them because they were going to start hearing that Lucy was mentally retarded. "She's never going to talk. She's never going to sign. She doesn't show any preference, she just isn't in there". And they took this news the same way they had all the others. Coleman states, "Okay, this is just another one, now she's mentally retarded. And I understand why you would feel that way, but I know that Lucy is in there, and I know she's just trapped inside a very uncooperative body."

Coleman continues, "I don't think anyone would have suggested that we try sign language with Lucy. Cerebral Palsy doesn't get any better or worse, it's just how she is....but fortunately for her, Lucy had been born into a family that used sign language 24 hours a day. And one day, Lucy was laying there with her fist up, and she brought one fist over to the other and knocked it, and she was looking at me like 'Mom do you get it?' and I could tell it wasn't an accident because her fists don't even go together, and I looked at her and she did it again and I said, Lucy are you signing 'More'? And her eyes lit up as if to say 'Mom you got it!' And it just went on from there. This wasn't a child who was mentally retarded...this was just a child who was trapped!" And now at the age of six, Lucy is in the first grade and not only is she fluent in sign language, but she also speaks beautifully!



When the first installment of "Signing Time - My First Signs" was finished, they made just 100 copies and presented them to people who knew and were in contact with Leah. They gave a bunch of them away, made them available on a small web site they launched and also offered them through Amazon.com. And once they started getting reviews from Amazon, it just snowballed from there. Coleman relates, "It spread through 'Word of Mom'. Moms telling other moms, you got to get this! When we started, we had a very narrow view of what we were trying to do, but after e-mails from parents of children with

autism, down-syndrome, speech-delay, and things you never heard of...and not just deaf children and children with disabilities, but also typical children. They can start communicating a year earlier than waiting for them to speak...it was just so powerful!"

It's now six years into "Signing Time" and they've made 13 shows that are broadcast in conjunction with public television stations across the country. They've launched several other sister series as well as made flash cards and board books available. The single video to bridge the communication gap for her daughter has turned into a pretty extensive business that Coleman herself admits is very much a team effort. They brought their father in as CEO and Coleman's husband is the on-site editor. She states, "We are very much together and connected. What we're doing has made such a difference for the girl's lives".

And many other children's lives as well. Coleman states, "Our fans are, for lack of a better word, such devout fans. When you impact a child's life, then you have a fan for life. After these shows, I stay and sign autographs and meet the families, because when you meet the family of a four year old who is autistic and has not said anything for four years...and now can communicate through signing...and now the parents know their favorite color...and know that they're crying in the middle of the night because they have an earache? When you meet that family, they just know that I get it. This is my family. Lucy was the first Signing Time miracle - and I get it."



Sherry Anderson

Nominated by Sherry Anderson:

Rachel was nominated by Sherry Anderson, who had this to say about Coleman and her story:

"I was introduced to Rachel Coleman by purchasing their video series on American Sign Language, called Signing Time. I learned from their website that they created Signing Time to help other children learn sign language so they could communicate with Rachel's daughter (Leah) who is deaf. Then when Rachel was pregnant with her second child (Lucy) was diagnosed with Spina Bifida and when she was born she also

had Cerebral Palsy. They now have created 13 episodes of Signing Time, books and flash cards. She is definitely a "Mom on the Move".

Tips