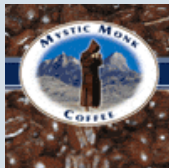


RECREATION AND TRAVEL



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Signing: A Gift for All Children

BY ELIZABETH FOSSHERALD COLUMNIST (FROM THE ISSUE OF 5/12/05)

5/12/05

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When Rachel Coleman was a young woman, she sang in a band. This seemed a very natural thing to do; her whole family was musical and the music business was her father's profession. One day, after returning from rehearsal, she stopped to pick up her 1-year-old daughter at her mother's house. Her mother, an experienced grandmother who had raised nine children of her own, asked Rachel to call to little Leah without letting the baby see her. Rachel did. And then she called again. And again. And the realization dawned; Leah could not hear. Rachel put down her guitar ? what point was there in making music her daughter would never hear?

The young family began to learn sign language together, completely immersing themselves in the silent speech that would enable them to understand each other. Slowly, it dawned on Rachel that she could understand Leah, but there was a vast world of children out there who had no idea what was meant by her daughter's gestures and some of those children were Leah's cousins. So, Rachel and her sister Emilie did what musical siblings do; they decided to make a music video to teach signs to all the children in Leah's extended family. And while they were at it, they figured that they would teach some friends and neighbors. The goal was simple. The just wanted Leah to be able to say, "Hi friend, let's play!" and to be understood.

Around this time, Rachel discovered via ultrasound that the new baby she was carrying had spina bifida. Wanting to give their child every opportunity, Rachel and her husband Aaron, opted to have prenatal intrauterine surgery to correct spina bifida. The surgery was successful, but because of the surgery, little Lucy was born eight weeks early. Premature birth resulted in cerebral palsy. There is a 1 in 1,000 chance a child will be born deaf. There is a 1 in 1,000 chance a child will have cerebral palsy. The Colemans have both a deaf child and a child with cerebral palsy. As Lucy grew, she had difficulty communicating. Doctors warned the Colemans that, because of her cerebral palsy, Lucy would not be able to communicate with Leah.

Another woman would go home, throw the covers over her head, have a good cry and never come out. Rachel had her cry and then blessed countless other families with her gift. That guitar was dusted off and her pain was poured into songs. But these weren't the songs of yesterday's band. These were children's songs ? well-produced, utterly captivating CDs and DVDs for children all over the world. They were songs that offered the gift of signed communication to every child. And, just after the release of the first Signing Time DVD, Lucy began to sign. Now, she signs and she speaks.

Rachel became increasingly aware that this language wasn't just for deaf children but for all children. Autistic children, children with Down Syndrome, children with delayed speech, and typically developing children all benefited from sign language. A 2-year-old who could sign what she wanted was much less likely to throw a tantrum. Mothers were given the tools to silently remind children of manners from across the room. Families were given a tactile tool which would catapult children into better spoken language and more readily acquired reading skills. Leah's "handicap" gave birth to a blessing of great worth.

Even if the skill of signing wasn't one we wanted to acquire as a family, I would love the DVDs. The songs are happy, wholesome, catchy and a welcome reprieve after years of Raffi and Joe Scruggs. My children can sign and sing about healthy eating, good manners, friendship and feelings. And if I stick around for the songs that accompany the credits, I can have a good cry while Rachel reminds me that all children learn in their own time and there is nothing we truly need when we have a family of love. Rachel Coleman is certainly singing again; this time, she sings for Leah and Lucy and all the children who will learn to communicate in their own time.

For information about Signing Time and to see clips of the Coleman family, go to www.signingtime.com.

Foss is a freelance writer from Northern Virginia.

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