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How I Did It: Rachel Coleman, CEO, Two Little Hands Productions
The music stopped after Rachel Coleman's daughter was found to be severely hearing impaired. But it came back in a big way -- and then Coleman discovered the power of Word-of-Mom.

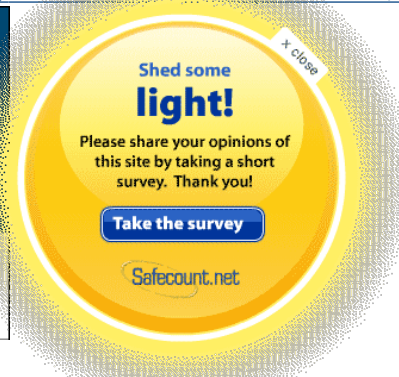
By: As told to Tamar Snyder

Music has always defined Rachel de Azavedo Coleman's life. Her grandmother was Alyce King, of The King Family Show, a 1960's music variety show. Her composer father, Lex de Azevedo, was nominated for a Golden Globe and is a former musical director for The Sonny and Cher Show. Coleman herself is a singer/songwriter who formed her own band, "We The Living." But the music stopped the day she discovered that her now 10-year-old daughter, Leah, was severely hearing-impaired. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, Coleman founded Two Little Hands Productions (No. 666 on the 2007 Inc. 5,000), producing DVDs that teach American Sign Language to kids. Last year, company revenue topped \$3 million. <http://www.signingtime.com/> product line has expanded to include CDs, board books, and flash cards. Coleman recently wrapped up production of a second set of 13 episodes for public television's Signing Time!. Each episode teaches hundreds of ASL signs useful in daily life, all modeled by Coleman; her daughter Leah; Leah's cousin, Alex (who can



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Signing Time! Rachel Coleman, CEO, Two Little Hands Productions
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hear); and their animated pet frog "Hopkins." Coleman reinforces the teaching of sign language through the singing of catchy tunes, clever animation, and dancing.

My oldest daughter, Leah, was born deaf. We found out a year later, when my sister turned on a CD player and it blared at full-blast. Everyone jumped -- except Leah, who just sat there. When she was diagnosed, I was singing in a band, writing music, had just put out a CD. I was all music all the time. Suddenly, there was no place for music in my life. My only child couldn't hear anything -- how could I go to band practice for four hours a day? So I stopped playing music. Instead, my husband and I focused on Leah.

I remembered sign language -- really just the alphabet -- from my Girl Scout days. Aaron [my husband] and I taught ourselves how to sign with her. By the time she was 18 months old, Leah could communicate her needs -- while her hearing peers still pointed and whined.

Leah got left out a lot. She didn't get invited to classmates' birthday parties because the grown-ups felt uncomfortable. At the soccer field, kids were uncomfortable being paired with her. They couldn't communicate with her. It really frustrated me. So I started teaching a weekly sign-language story time at local preschools. The kids loved it.

My sister, Emilie, a theater graduate, suggested we make a show teaching sign language. Even if we made just 100 DVDs and gave them to people who knew and loved Leah, it would improve her life drastically.

You could call it selfish. I recognized a need in our life and wanted to fill it. I picked up a guitar and wrote the theme song. I hadn't written a song since Leah had been diagnosed.

It made perfect sense to have Leah modeling the signs. We decided to also include Emilie's two-year-old son, Alex. He grew up next-door, so he has been signing since 10 months, long before he could verbalize words. He just picked up on it. He'd tell us,

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"I'm tired," "I want milk," "All done."

We began production of *My First Signs* in February 2001 and released the video in May 2002. We bought the domain name and orders trickled in. I call it "word-of-mom."

Then the *Today Show* called. Here's a business tip: When the *Today Show* asks when you're making more shows, you make more shows. Our segment aired in February 2003.

I gave birth to a second daughter named Lucy, who by now was turning 3. She was born with spina bifida and cerebral palsy. Doctors said she'd never speak -- that she was mentally retarded. But Lucy proved them wrong. She was our first Signing Time! miracle. She learned to sign, and eventually to speak. Signing gave her a voice. Suddenly I realized the benefits sign language offers children with special needs. It's the best physical therapy for fine motor skills.

Every Wednesday night, I conduct a live Web chat. As a mom with two children with disabilities, I understand how alone other moms feel -- and the need for support. I know what it's like to load a wheelchair into the car, what it feels like when a child's hearing aid dies in the middle of a movie.

Kids are growing up with Alex and Leah. Now, when we go out, they get recognized. So I need to actually brush my hair and put on makeup. I always carry autograph cards and *Signing Time!* temporary tattoos in my purse. People always apologize, but I'm so glad they love our show.

Sign language is really handy. Aaron and I can communicate across the parking lot. It's quieter than texting, and faster, too.

Last year, I took Leah to karate and noticed a little boy acting up. His father signed "pay attention" in a mannerism similar to mine. Later, the boy approached me. "I saw you on TV," he said. "You taught me how to sign 'tiger,' 'lion' and 'seal.'" That day, I ran into two more people signing with hearing kids. I got into the car

later and my eyes filled with tears. So much has changed in the past six years -- a generation of kids is growing up thinking of signing as normal. And I had a part in that.

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