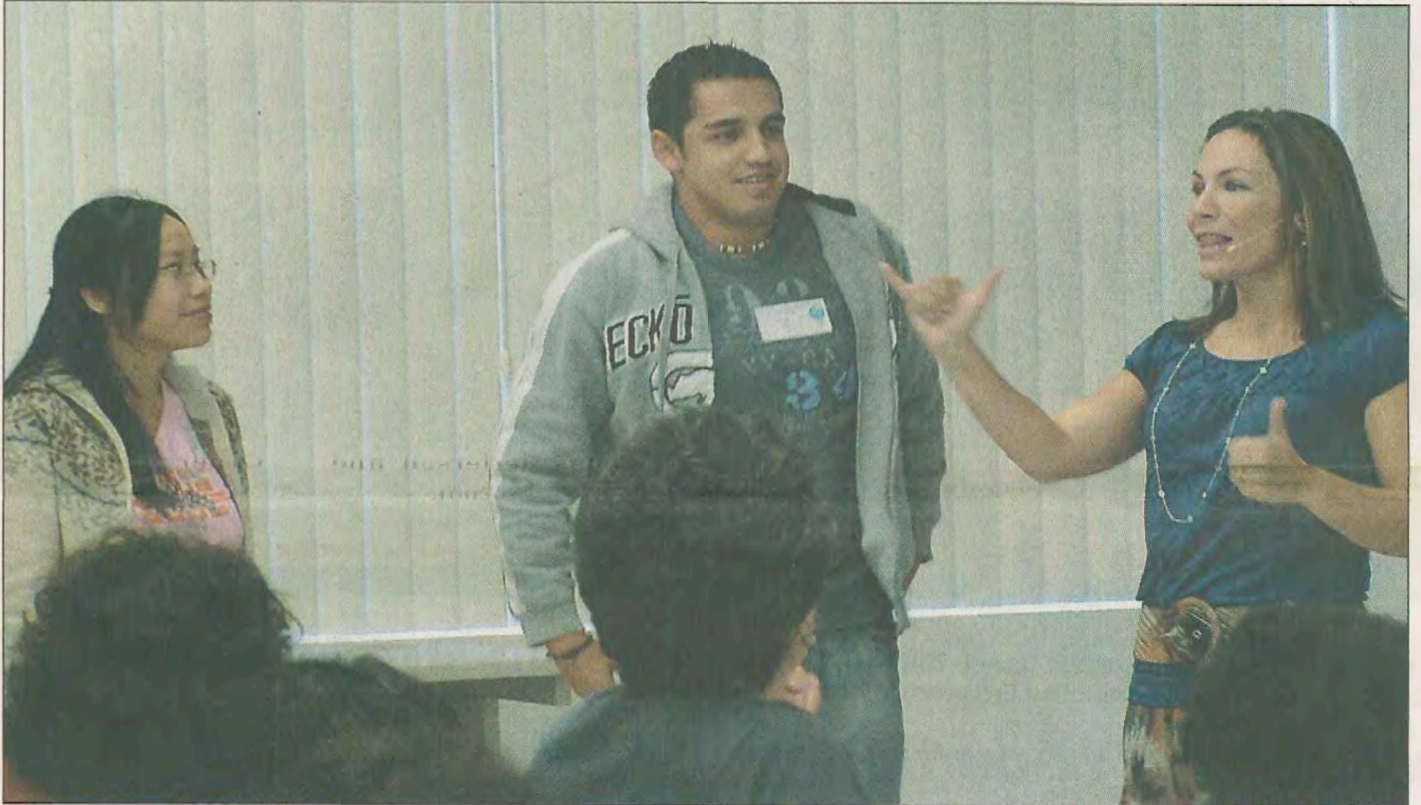


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H&N photo by Ryan Pfeil

**PBS' "Signing Time" television show host Rachel Coleman, far right, speaks at the Klamath Falls Early Childhood Conference and Fair Saturday at Klamath Community College.**

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# Communicating without words

Host of PBS  
program says  
sign language  
is for everyone

BY RYAN PFEIL  
H&N Staff Writer

Rachel Coleman's first experience with deafness came when she discovered her first child, Leah, had severe to profound deafness. Leah was 1 year old. After the discovery, Coleman and her husband, Aaron, sat consoling each other and crying. Leah walked in, looking at them with a concerned look on her face.

"In that moment, we got a gift," Coleman said. "In her world, there's nothing wrong, and she's fine with that."

Coleman, the host and co-creator of PBS' "Signing Time," was the keynote speaker at the Klamath Falls Early Childhood Conference and Fair this weekend at Klamath Community College.

The conference drew nearly 100 educators and parents from around Southern Oregon, who learned about integrating sign language in the classroom and at home.

"Every child signs,"

Coleman said. "Babies crawl before they walk, babies sign before they talk."

Preschool teacher and YMCA employee Laura Boyd already uses sign language when she teaches her students. She traveled from Medford to attend the workshop.

"I find if (children) are doing something with the song, they'll learn it a lot faster and enjoy it more," Boyd said. "The kids get more excited."

## Learning signs

Experts helped Coleman and her husband in the beginning. They learned signs alongside their daughter and saw results when she was 14 months old. In two months, Leah learned 50 signs.

"She was craving communication," Coleman said.

The true realization of how quickly Leah grasped her new way of communicating came in Coleman's kitchen. Some of Leah's friends were pointing at pantry shelves, making the usual toddler noises associated with wanting a particular food. Leah

walked in and signed that she wanted a grilled cheese sandwich and a glass of milk. She quickly changed it to chocolate milk, thanked Coleman and told her she loved her before walking out.

"It is so empowering," Coleman said. "It's the cutest thing you've ever seen."

## Television show

Coleman's second child, Lucy, was born with cerebral palsy. She did not communicate or move, staying very still in her crib.

Coleman's sister approached her about doing some videos, and Coleman agreed if the focus was on teaching sign language. Leah and Coleman's nephew, Alex, were the original stars. After watching a few completed episodes, Lucy started moving her hands.

"It was proof that Lucy was in there," Coleman said.

Today, "Signing Time" has more than 30 DVDs and other educational materials, including CDs, flash cards, and books. The program has been on

PBS for three years. CBS News and "The Today Show" have interviewed Coleman about the show.

She has received numerous e-mails from parents of children with autism and Down syndrome telling her the show has helped their children to become better communicators.

Kadi Estes, a teacher's aide at Bright Beginnings preschool in Klamath Falls, has a 6-year-old son who picked up one of the books on Friday. By the next day, he had learned all the signs it contained.

"It's incredible how fast they picked it up," Estes said.

Conference attendee Jane King uses movements with her grandchildren when she sings songs with them.

"I like to learn anything I can," King said.

Coleman hopes to continue educating people with her show. She also hopes to continue touching the lives of others.

"It's for everybody," she said about sign language. "I get to live a life where I watch miracles happen."