

Child with Down syndrome to meet one of her heroes

By Chris Jones  0

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When Mike and Rebecca Klehm learned that their second child would be born with Down syndrome and cleft issues, they decided they would bring her into the world and do everything possible to help Addie live life to the fullest.

The Klehms realized their daughter would struggle with communication, so they enrolled in baby sign language classes.

“Her first sign was more, and we were thrilled,” Rebecca Klehm said. “This was just like her first word to us, and we built on that with milk, drink, please. Now she says milk, and signs at the same time. It’s very rewarding for her and us. The news was overwhelming at first, but she is doing great, and she surprises us every day with what she is learning.”

On Saturday, 4-year-old Addison will meet one of her heroes, Rachel Coleman, the star and creator of Signing Time!, a DVD series designed to teach children to communicate using American Sign Language. Coleman will perform during the Down Syndrome Association of Central Oklahoma Buddy Walk at the AT&T Bricktown Ballpark.

Coleman has a part in the lives of many families even though most have never met her. Coleman, a writer and performer in a folk rock band, and her husband, Aaron had their first child in 1996, and were always amazed their baby could sleep during band practices and concerts. When their daughter Leah, was 14 months old, they learned she was deaf.

Their priorities changed immediately and the parents began teaching American Sign Language to Leah as fast as she could learn it, and when she was 18 months old her sign language vocabulary surpassed the spoken vocabulary of hearing children. The Coleman’s second child, Lucy, was a premature baby born with spina bifida and cerebral palsy. Doctors told her parents that Lucy probably wouldn’t speak or have the use of her rigid fingers to sign with her deaf sister.

Coleman and her sister Emilie created an entertaining video to teach sign language to hearing children. They planned a short DVD starring 3-year old Alex and 5-year old Leah to give to friends and family, and completed the first volume of Signing Time! in 2002. They instantly had fans who wanted more videos, and their company, Two Little Hands Productions, was born.

The use of sign language gained recognition as a tool for communication anyone can

use. Whether used by a pre-verbal infant, a non-verbal child with disabilities, or a family who wants to learn ASL as a second language, signing has become part of American culture. In 2006, Two Little hands Productions made the Signing Time series available for broadcast on public television stations across the country.

“These videos are entertaining, and wonderfully produced,” Rebecca Klehm said, “and they are helping our entire family communicate with Addison. The grandparents, aunts and uncles know how to sign, and are involved with her life.”

Mike Klehm said he doesn’t know if Addie will live the American dream of college, marriage, and children, but he and his wife are preparing her for wherever her path takes her. The parents said they didn’t know what to expect when they were told their child was a Down syndrome baby. And they still don’t know. But many of their fears have already been relieved.

“Our first fear for her was the question of acceptance,” he said. “We wondered if she would be, and she is accepted by friends and family, and at her day care. Addie has totally changed my outlook on life, and has helped me focus on what is important in life. I am more patient, kind and thoughtful, and I take a longer term look at life.”



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