

## Child to meet hero

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By Jeremy C. Ruark

Seaside Signal |

For 6-year-old Mariah Almoguer-Rawlins the world is a special place. Mariah loves to dance and sign. "When I take her into the store that has a screen where you can listen to music, Mariah loves to push all the music buttons and she dances the whole time. Everything from ballet to rap, Mariah does it all," said Maureen Rawlins, Mariah's mother.

But those standing nearby may find it difficult to understand Mariah. Especially when she speaks.

The Nehalem Elementary student was born with Down syndrome and has trouble communicating. "She can do just about anything any 6-year-old can do," said Rawlins, "but her number one problem is speaking."

Rawlins said Mariah's troubles communicating often causes other youngsters to shy away. "When the kids are young, they want to be her friend and play with her. But when they get older, they realize she is different. They move away from her and they don't want to be with her."

Mariah lives with her mother and older brother in Nehalem. Rawlins has raised eight children but said trying to keep up with Mariah is the hardest thing she has ever done.

"Mariah is challenging because she is so stimulated that she is in action all day long and getting into things." Rawlins described her daughter as thinking like a 3-year old, but attempting things that a 6-year-old would do. Things like opening a door, leaving the house, and walking down the street ... without telling anyone beforehand.

"If she watches me do something," said Rawlins, "she'll turn around and try to do it. At some point that will be a very good thing, but right now that can be dangerous."

At the same time, said Rawlins, parenting Mariah is a joyous responsibility. "She makes me laugh everyday. She makes me cry everyday. There is never a dull moment in my house,"

When pregnant with Mariah, Rawlins said doctors told her that her child would not survive childbirth. "During the whole time, the doctors said, 'it's a no go.' Well, Mariah is here and she's made a big splash in life. She was meant to be here."

After Mariah was born, her mother searched for options that would help Mariah learn and to be able to communicate. Rawlins decided to try sign language. "We started with a few things when she was just 12 months old, like "stop" and "no" and "eat" and "drink," explained Rawlins. The lessons continued when the family moved from California to Nehalem.

Stacey Schuring, Mariah's special-education teacher at Nehalem School introduced the family to "Signing Times," a DVD series that encourages communications for children of all abilities using American Sign Language.

"When she began signing and we understood what she was trying to say, it opened up a huge door, and Mariah realized that," said Rawlins.

Now, when Mariah speaks, she also uses sign language, becoming very animated. Rawlins said that helps others understand her. "I say the words back to her," said Rawlins, "to reinforce what she is saying."

Mariah soon will have the opportunity to meet one of her heroes, the star and creator of the "Signing Times," Rachel Coleman. Coleman is scheduled to perform a sign language concert during this year's 5th annual North Coast Down Syndrome Network Buddy Walk on Saturday, Sept. 26 at 1 p.m. at the Seaside Convention Center.

The walk will begin at 10 a.m. at Quatat Park. It is the annual fundraising event for the North Coast Down Syndrome Network,

