

Kristen E.

Stratton, JM, is a Southern California-based educational advocate and professional speaker. She serves as a member of the Deaf Steering Committee for the California Department of Developmental Services. Previously, she was a law clerk for Disability Rights California and a former ASTra special education advocate with the California Hands & Voices. She and her husband, Jon, are the proud parents of three children, two of whom are Deaf. Stratton welcomes questions and comments about this article at kristen.e.stratton@gmail.com.

Deaf Role Models

((Kiss Fist))

By Kristen E. Stratton

As a deaf adult who was raised using spoken English and who received no education in Deaf culture or American Sign Language (ASL), I was determined to raise my sons—one deaf and neurotypical and the other deafdisabled—differently. I wanted them to be “Big D Deaf*.” I wanted to give them access to a visual language, a culture deeply rooted in history, and a beautiful and supportive community. The only problem was I couldn’t give them that myself. I needed help. I needed to find a Deaf Role Model.

Truth be told, I had no idea there was such a thing as a Deaf Role Model until I began to interact with the Deaf community. Though I identified as “hearing impaired” growing up, used hearing aids, and voiced, I quickly began to assimilate into my newly found Deaf identity. Having not learned ASL until my sons were identified as deaf, I didn’t realize what a beautiful community it was. I quickly fell in love with the language that was fully accessible to both of my Deaf children and to me!

We were referred to our family’s Deaf Role Model by a local Deaf itinerant teacher in early 2018. We learned that her role would be to walk alongside our family and be a language model for our Deaf sons, our hearing daughter, and us as parents. She would encourage us, answer our well-meaning but sometimes ignorant questions, and help our sons grow to be confident Deaf adults.

Tina Hall, our Deaf Role Model, has been so much more than that. We consider her family and are truly blessed to know her. Tina is a graduate of Gallaudet University and a Gallaudet Hall of Famer for track and field. She has worked as a Certified Deaf Interpreter. She is patient, kind, enthusiastic, supportive, understanding, flexible, loving, and humble. She has visited our home once a week for over five years (with the exception of when our Deafdisabled son was ill).

Photos courtesy of Kristen E. Stratton

Working with William

On a typical day with Tina, she will warmly greet our family. Depending on how my Deafdisabled son is feeling, she and I will usually sign away about how our day went and catch up with each other. Together, we model reciprocal communication, and Tina always has eyes on my son to reinforce and connect with him. She works most effectively with William through play. Tina has been known to bake cookies and “bribe” his cooperation. She has also jumped on the trampoline with him while asking him questions and encouraging him to respond. They will also play pretend games, such as cooking or restaurant work, or just sit and color together. Tina meets William where he is at on each particular day and is never impatient. She also holds him accountable and sets high expectations for his behavior. She believes in William’s ability to be a respectful and successful young man, and she doesn’t let him think he can be anything less. I love her for that.

Working with Steven

As for my neurotypical Deaf son, Tina takes a more academic approach. She usually focuses on a particular skill she wants to develop that day. Lately, she has been working on improving Steven’s expressive fingerspelling accuracy and speed as well as better developing his receptive language by reading fingerspelling at the speed of a fluent Deaf adult. Tina will also do skill checks with Steven’s basic vocabulary by asking him how he is and what’s going on in his life. When he is fatigued or sometimes just not in the mood, she is supportive and accommodating but also pushes gently so that Steven still learns what she wants him to that day.

Depending on the day, my hearing daughter, Elizabeth, will join in. Her receptive language has grown so much



over the years but, as with many bilingual children, she is shy about using her second language in front of people she doesn’t know well. I hope that with time she grows to be a proud CODA/SODA (child of deaf adult[s]/sister of deaf adult[s]). I know she has it in her.

A Family Affair

My husband and mother-in-law also treasure Tina. Though they get the least amount of time with her, she greets them as warmly as she does the rest of us. We will all sit together at the end of

Above: Steven and William work with Tina to build language through interaction and fun, including jumping on a trampoline together and having conversations.

her sessions with our sons and just chat about life, family, pets, work, home repairs, travel plans, faith, gratitude, and dinner plans. We talk about it all. Tina has been an open book, sharing her life with us so generously so that we can benefit from her storytelling and her experiences. I am grateful my sons are her “mentees.”



Left: Tina and William practice 1:1 correspondence using a visual aid while Tina signs the corresponding number in ASL. **Below:** Tina and Steven pose for a photo during one of their weekly sessions.



ASL are accessible to our community in ways that spoken language just cannot be. I am grateful for the choices our Deaf Role Model has given us by showing us how to confidently and competently be Deaf.

Most of all, I have learned that it is okay to need help raising my Deaf children. While I want to be their support system and safeguard them from any harm, I don't know how to navigate life as a Deaf person as I grew up in the "hearing" world and largely functioning as a hearing person. As my own hearing loss progresses, I find that I, too, am being "role modeled" and learning to self-advocate. That lived experience is so valuable.

Deaf Role Models have an important role in helping families with d/Deaf or hard of hearing children to build effective and meaningful communication with each other and in offering them support—even for families in which a parent is deaf like me.

To learn more about Deaf Role Models, check out <https://nationaldeafcenter.org/news-items/importance-of-deaf-role-models>.

**The uppercase 'D' in "Deaf" is used to describe people who identify as culturally Deaf and are actively engaged with the Deaf community.*

As for me, I could be classified as a mentee, too. Tina has helped me step confidently into my own Deaf identity. I look forward to our talks. Some days, I can feel my brain is fatigued and my hands do not flow as smoothly through the air as I know they can; my fingerspelling will be fumbled. She knows our family goes through a lot and that I am one tired mom and wife.

Our perspective as the mentees is different than hers will be as a Deaf Role Model, but I want to share what I have learned as a deaf adult who was not affiliated with the Deaf community growing up and also what I have learned as the parent of Deaf children:

- Deaf Role Models are valuable—their time, knowledge, and wisdom. Families should make every effort to pay their Deaf Role Model for their time or use an agency through which that time is subsidized. Advocate for your Deaf Role Model to be a service in your child's Individualized Education Program or to be paid for by another community-/state-funded disability services program. Deaf Role Models are worth it. It is an investment in your child's educational and vocational future as well as in your relationship with your child by ensuring you can communicate with them effectively.
- Always graciously accept correction or feedback from Deaf Role Models, who are taking time out of their day to help you be better.
- ASL is valuable no matter how much hearing a d/Deaf or hard of hearing child has. Hearing aids break, cochlear implants come off at the end of a long day, listening fatigue is real, and a whole signing community awaits you if you just take that leap! ASL and ProTactile

An Interview with a Deaf Role Model

While I could continue to go on and on in praise of Tina and the importance of Deaf Role Models for families raising d/Deaf and/or hard of hearing children, it makes the most sense to ask Tina what wisdom she would like to share as well as for a candid explanation of her experience as a Deaf Role Model working with our family.

KRISTEN: How would you describe your role as a Deaf Role Model?

TINA: My role is to encourage strong relationships between d/Deaf and hard of hearing children and their family members. I am not there to replace the parents but to help them build strong connections with their children.

KRISTEN: What are some of the things you do as a Deaf Role Model?

TINA: One thing I do as a Deaf Role Model is to help reinforce patience for parents and behavior for the kids. For example, when I first met you and Jon, you both had learned a little sign language and knew how to communicate a bit. The first things we focused on were facial expressions and setting behavior expectations with your children. I helped you [Kristen] and Grandma to really emphasize your facial expressions, which definitely helped open up communication with William. These skills and expectations helped you all to understand why William was frustrated and also allowed William and Steven to build a stronger relationship and connection. Starting with facial expressions and empathizing patience helps while parents are picking up the language and allows them to still interact with their child.

Another thing I do comes later, over time, as parents pick up more words. I help to support their role and encourage their kids to respect them. Learning to sign builds a strong relationship.

I have learned that I need to be very flexible in what I do in order to best support each individual family member in the way they need it.

KRISTEN: Would you explain a bit about your experiences working with our family?

TINA: First, I met with you and Jon to see what was happening with your children. I wanted to watch you with your children, to see how you made eye contact with them, and to observe your children at home. When I first met your family and your son William, he was shy. I worked to help him improve his interactions with other Deaf people. Now I see he is happy to have me come over. I have helped the whole family, including the grandparents, and I am there to support you all. I sit side by side with every member of the family, and I am very patient with everyone. I have seen a lot of improvement over the years. William doesn't feel lost in his own family. I can see that with my help, he really feels pride and happiness. I do the same for Steven. Again, I see lots of improvement.

KRISTEN: What would you say to parents who feel nervous or overwhelmed by learning to sign?

TINA: I would tell them to take things one day at a time and to try to be patient with themselves. Language is something that gets picked up over time.

KRISTEN: You are a Deaf Role Model to our neurotypical Deaf child and to our Deafdisabled child. How would a family find a Deaf Role Model, especially for their Deafdisabled child?

TINA: You should get a referral from someone in the Deaf community to help find a Deaf Role Model—maybe from an agency or a deaf school. For example, you found me through a referral from my friend who is a Deaf itinerant teacher and she interviewed me. I have worked with a lot of people in the Deafdisabled community as both a Deaf Role Model and a Deaf interpreter. I have also worked as a Deaf Role Model for people who are

deafblind, deafdisabled, deaf autistic, and deaf CP [cerebral palsy]. It is especially important for the Deafdisabled community to have access to role models because their access to the Deaf community is sometimes limited but their need for community is just as important. Sometimes it takes the right person to be patient, to help stop behaviors, and to gain the attention of the d/Deaf or hard of hearing child, but it is so important. It is also especially important for a Deaf adult to be involved in a Deaf child's education because often those children are perceived as more delayed than they actually are based on a language difference.

KRISTEN: Did you have someone who was a role model for you as a Deaf child?

TINA: I grew up oral at first. I was surrounded by audiologists and hearing teachers. I only had one Deaf person to look up to when I was little. That single person modeled language for my sister and me, and we picked it up quickly. That person was my role model until I was 15. Then I attended a Deaf high school and was able to be with other Deaf students. I am so grateful for that experience. Once I was around Deaf teachers, it absolutely changed my life. It made me want to be a Deaf Role Model and encourage that confidence and development of language in others.

KRISTEN: Do you have any last thoughts to share?

TINA: While most of the time the mother is the primary caregiver, it's also really important for dads to learn sign language as well. Both roles are equally important. Whoever is involved in raising that child, it is so important for them to learn.