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Looking Back: A Deaf Woman Extolls the Importance of Family in Language Access

By Stacy Abrams

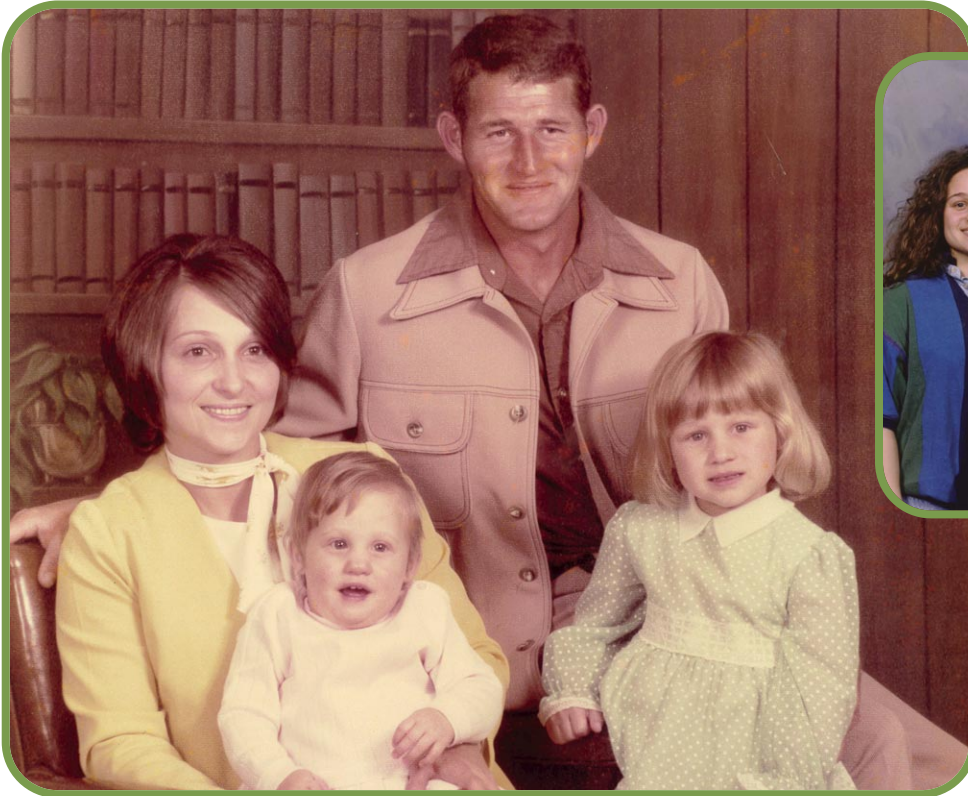
*"Sign language is the noblest gift God has given to deaf people."
~ George Veditz*

Families' options for language access for their deaf or hard of hearing babies and children have increased significantly over time, but it wasn't always like that. Choices for families used to be extremely limited. For example, even as a deaf baby born in 1976, I had more access to my environment than my older sister, Christie, did.

When she was born back in 1973, my parents went through the journey of many hearing families with deaf and hard of hearing babies. They discovered Christie was deaf at 2 months old, but the professionals at the doctor's office did not confirm this until she was 15 months old. As a result, my parents had no information about deaf education or deaf children, and my sister had no easy access to language. **In fact, the only piece of advice they received from the doctor was not to sign.** However, as Christie grew and my parents wanted to communicate with her, they invented signs and used them at home (e.g., "milking the cows" for *milk* because our family lived on a farm and we had cows, pinching the nose for *potty*).

Our family lived in the middle of Arkansas, and the nearest town was six miles away. However, we would travel to Little Rock, which was an hour away, for appointments. There, at the Arkansas Department of Health, my parents and Christie, who was now 18 months old, finally met audiologists who "discussed all

Photos courtesy of Stacy Abrams



Left: Stacy (age 1), Christie (age 4), and their parents in 1977, already well into their signing journey.

Above: A proud Gallaudet family in 1994; Christie was already a student, and Stacy was soon to enroll.

the options” (oral or Total Communication) and were again advised not to sign with their daughter. But my mom was always an independent thinker. She asked how many words my sister would learn by age 6 and the woman did not have an answer, so my mom decided that if my sister picked up spoken words then that would be fine but signing made more sense for a child who was deaf.

The Arkansas Department of Health referred my family to a woman—the only one in the state—who worked with deaf toddlers. My mom contacted her, convinced her to make time despite the woman’s full schedule, and they figured out how and where to meet. When the funding for the woman’s service ran out, my mom still drove to the woman’s home two hours away and even to the university three hours away to see her. “I just knew that I had to do what I felt was best for my daughter,” my mom said. With the woman, my mom learned some signs. She then taught them to my dad, who focused on practical signs and used them with Christie. My sister was “like a sponge,” my mom said, soaking up the language that she could see. I had also been born in the midst of all this and was now a few months old, beginning my own language journey. The Arkansas Department of Health had a playgroup in which Christie was enrolled at around age 3, and the playgroup lasted for a year. When that ended, though, my

mom was ready. She had already done her research, and she was determined to advocate—for both of her deaf daughters.

My mom knew about programs in other states for deaf toddlers and their families. They offered deaf children support from various educational professionals, including deaf and hard of hearing members of the community. She collected brochures and information, and she went to see the principal of the Arkansas School for the Deaf (ASD). She said ASD had to do something. ASD was receptive. In fact, administrators had been thinking about establishing a program for a while. They sent the early intervention team for training and then started the first Parent-Infant Program (PIP) at ASD. Christie enrolled in pre-kindergarten at ASD, and a few months later, I joined her at the school. I was 18 months old now, officially the youngest student at ASD, and ASD’s first PIP child. (Christie and I would spend the rest of our childhood attending ASD.)

Introduction to the Deaf Community

As my mom was navigating this journey of access for us, she wanted to connect with other deaf people who could offer valuable information and guidance. In this time before the internet and social media existed, the closest Deaf community to us in Arkansas consisted of a single Deaf family. The dad



Left: Abrams in one of her classes at the Arkansas School for the Deaf in 1993.

give me a chance. I worked with speech and language therapists who worked with children from all over the world with different disabilities who used sign language. I taught ASL classes during lunch for families. I did not have an interpreter, and I communicated through lipreading, signs, gestures, and writing. Still, I must have done something right because they asked me to come back the following summer as head intern. I loved the work, and I realized that my passion was working with families with deaf and hard of hearing children.

I went on to become coordinator of the Deaf Mentor Program at the New Mexico School for the Deaf for 7 years, then I became the Deaf Mentor coordinator for the state of Arizona. I spent 10 years working with families with deaf and hard of hearing

children—over 250 families altogether—connecting them with trained Deaf adults. Deaf Mentors use the SKI-HI Deaf Mentor Program curriculum that emphasizes learning ASL, connection to Deaf/signing communities, and sharing resources and information in support of deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

#whyIsign for Building Connections

In Arizona, I created #whyIsign, a personal social media campaign, because many families are still not given resources or support to include signing as a mode of communication with their children. For most families, their baby is the first deaf person they meet. They often feel alone, nervous, and scared to connect with the Deaf community. Our diverse Deaf communities often desire to connect with hearing families, too, but lack knowledge of where families are and how to reach out.

When my sister and I were little, my mom wanted to connect with other families with deaf and hard of hearing children, but she could not due to privacy concerns. Now, with social media and other organizations, families have more opportunities to connect with each other. Many families use social media to receive and share information. Communicating through narratives is one of the best ways to share information, so the goal is to always share stories because every #whyIsign story needs to be seen, heard, and felt.

Through sharing #whyIsign narratives, people can:

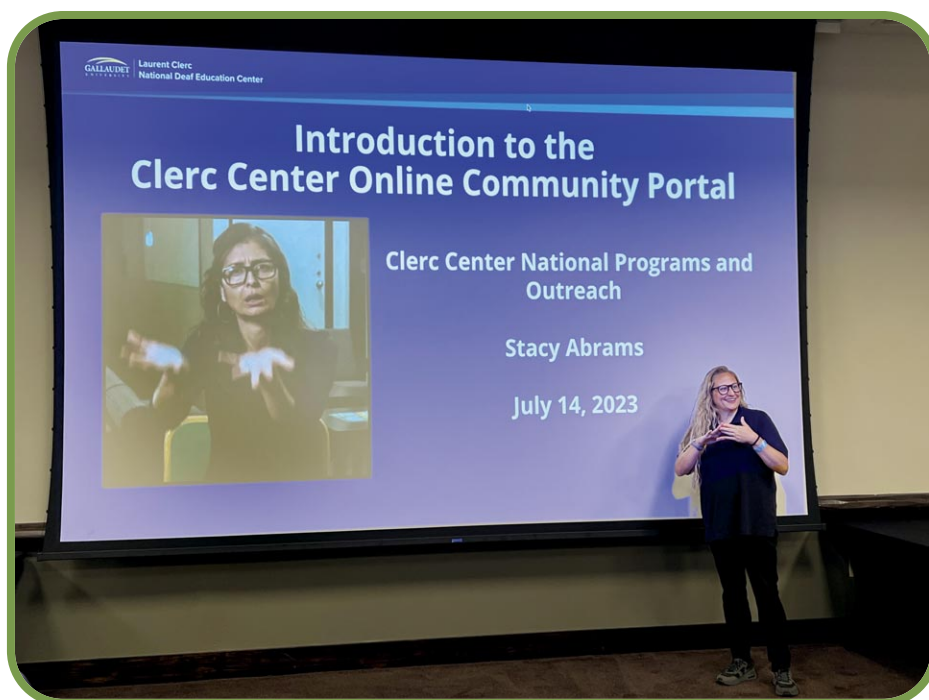
- Connect with families with deaf and hard of hearing children and share experiences
- Connect to diverse Deaf and hard of hearing communities

owned an auto body shop; the son was about 10 years old; and the grandad, who was hearing, drove a bus to my mom's school when she was a student, and they always waved to say hello. My mom decided to pop over and see if they would be willing to answer some questions. In the late 1970s, it was maybe still a radical idea to seek out deaf adults to learn about the needs of deaf children, but my mom wanted to know how a deaf family worked. She asked questions about the TTY device used with a telephone to call others, and she saw how a flashing doorbell light worked. She also learned more practical information about living as a deaf person in that first one-hour visit than she had learned in the first two years of my sister's life.

As the second deaf child in a family that had been all hearing, it was easier for me. My sister—my first deaf teacher—began signing with me from the moment I arrived home. (I was identified as deaf at 5 months old, and that was considered early in the 1970s.) My mom had already learned to make everything visual. She also learned American Sign Language (ASL) while working at an agency supporting deaf individuals and from interacting with the Deaf and signing community that supported my family's ASL journey; she would eventually become an ASL interpreter. My father signed with me as well, and both of my parents ensured my access to language and community as early and as fully as possible.

The Impact of Language: A Life of Success

With language access firmly established, and with the constant support of my family, I went on to graduate from ASD and then earned my bachelor's degree from Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. Then in graduate school, I convinced the Dolphin Human Therapy Program in Key Largo, Florida, to



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receive early intervention along with family support and saw what worked and what did not work. Now, I am supporting families with deaf and hard of hearing children to ensure they have an accessible and equitable education starting from when the children are born.

Times have certainly changed since my sister and I were students. Fortunately, early access to language is now regarded as a human right. Thanks to today's social media and technology, families and students can learn about opportunities in their communities; they can more easily get together, share information and resources, and learn from and support each other.

I would not be where I am without the determination of my family and the amazing communities that came together to support my mom and dad

in raising their two deaf daughters. I have benefitted from early exposure to ASL, parent advocacy, and equitable education. This allowed me to become a passionate professional and a proud member of the Deaf community. Now I want to support hearing families in connecting to the Deaf and signing communities so that no deaf or hard of hearing child will ever be left behind again.

Author's note: For more information on the Clerc Center and the REAL Project, visit <https://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu> and <https://www.aidb.org/real>, respectively.

- Connect with the signing communities (e.g., children of deaf adults/siblings of deaf adults, students, parents, friends)
- Share resources and information about the experiences of raising a deaf or hard of hearing child
- Understand that sign language is a right, not an option

Looking Ahead, Passing It On

I feel that I have come full circle with my life. Currently, I am a project manager for early intervention for the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center's National Programs and Outreach, which provides resources to families and professionals related to educating and supporting deaf and hard of hearing children (ages birth to 21). In this position, I also provide support for the Regional Early Acquisition of Language (REAL) Project, which is a collaboration between the Clerc Center and the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind. The REAL Project provides a network of support for early intervention providers, families, and the medical community who work with deaf and hard of hearing children from birth to 3 years old in the United States as well as in the U.S. territories. My parents could have benefitted from a program such as REAL back when they were beginning their language access journey for my sister and me. Still, I did

Above and right: As part of their work with the Clerc Center and its REAL Project, Abrams and colleague Shanae Rouse present to families and professionals around the country on Clerc Center resources and the importance of early intervention for deaf and hard of hearing children.



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