

OF SERPENTS AND DOVES:

My Experience Learning to Work with the Educational System

By Traci Penland

Traci Penland is the mother of three children, two of whom are deaf. She earned her bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of North Georgia. Previously an advocate for Hands & Voices, the national parent advocacy organization, Penland recently started *Lead with Love*, a blog for parents of children born with hearing loss. She lives with her family in Atlanta, Ga., and welcomes questions and comments about this article at tracipenland@gmail.com.

There were 10 of us at the table. We, the eight parents who had requested the meeting to talk about educating our children through American Sign Language (ASL), joined the director and the assistant director of special education and a researcher from a nearby research institute. The only person I felt was on our side was the researcher. The children represented in the room were either adopted, like mine, or from homes where the parents were not yet fluent in ASL. As a result, our children were already language delayed, and this added to the tension. We knew language was critical to our children's education, so we wanted them to begin intensive ASL instruction immediately. Every parent in the room had the same goal in mind—that our children graduate high school fully prepared for the rigor of college academics. The atmosphere was tense. In fact, I felt like it was a war ... two sides, each trying to outplay, outwit, and outlast—but I was ready. Rosalee, at 6 years old, was just beginning her educational journey. Nothing was more important to me than my daughter. Nothing was more important to my daughter than her education. If I had to fight for it, I would. War, as everyone knows, is hell. I was prepared to go through hell.

Thankfully, with Rosalee now in third grade, that's no longer how I feel. Rosalee has strong support in school. She has a teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students for English Language Arts, a language therapist fluent in ASL, a team of highly qualified interpreters, a daily ASL class, and a co-teacher in math. She is still behind in most areas due to her language delay, but she has made huge progress this year. We had our most recent Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting last month. It lasted four hours. I brought food. We talked about her current reading level, tweaked the drafted goals, and laughed about how many people would be invited to her high school graduation party. The assistant

Photos courtesy of Traci Penland



Left: Rosalee (second from right) with two deaf friends, Fabrizio and Faith, and a hearing friend (far left) named Price. Price knew no ASL when they started kindergarten together. However, when the school identifies a child with a proficiency towards signing, they keep them in the same class with the deaf children every year. As a result, Price has become fluent at age 10. It's truly amazing to watch her sign.

what happens! Information overload! Click to click, site to site—it was too much. I couldn't process all the material.

Fortunately, not long after that first meeting, I found something that changed my life. I was invited to attend a training given by the Georgia chapter of Hands & Voices, a parent-driven, nonprofit organization dedicated to providing support to families irrespective of the family's communication choice with their child. At the training, they presented the information in the *Hands & Voices Educational Advocacy Guidebook*. What a godsend! This was it—the map I had been looking for. Words and phrases I had been vaguely familiar with like “504 plan” and “IDEA” became comprehensible, even second nature to me. Finally, I felt knowledgeable enough to let my guard down.

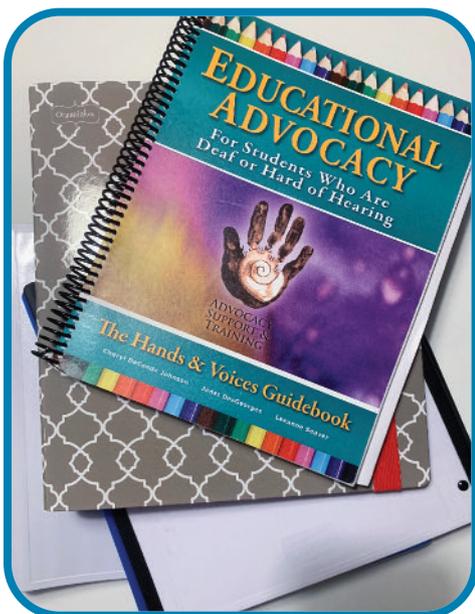
Eventually, I began working with Hands & Voices as an educational advocate, and I had the honor of meeting parents across the country facing challenges similar to my own.

As a result of my growing knowledge base, the next few meetings with the school officials went much better. I stopped talking so much and started listening. I learned about reading strategies that had worked for students in the past. Members of the school connected me with other parents of kids with hearing loss who I hadn't yet met. We started tossing around ideas for celebrating Deaf culture within the school. Together, we came up with a unique way for Rosalee to connect with

director of special education, who has attended all Rosalee's IEP meetings, said he would give a speech celebrating her accomplishment. The meeting felt supportive, friendly, as if we were all partners in devising the best possible education for Rosalee. So, this is the story of how I stopped thinking of “the school”—the combined presence of teachers, professionals, support staff, deaf education specialists, audiologists, and administrators—as my enemy. This is the story of how I realized that, like me, each person was an individual and, also like me, each cared about my daughter; they had her best educational

interests at heart.

Like most great changes, this one happened slowly. Diplomacy and forging partnerships do not come naturally for me. I was born in Central America in the middle of a civil war. Even though I was adopted and brought to the United States when I was an infant, conflict was in my blood—a fallback stance that always felt like the right thing to do. So, when I showed up at that first meeting and realized everyone at the table was more informed than I was, I immediately felt defensive. I had tried to get informed before the meeting, but just Google “IEP” and see



Above: These are just a few of my notebooks, featuring the *Hands & Voices Educational Advocacy Guidebook* referenced in this article.

her hearing peers by creating a class photo book showing each child's picture with his or her name sign (a special sign that is used to identify a person in ASL). The photo book was not my idea, but it came to life as I shared with the team how frustrating it was that Rosalee couldn't give me the name of any of her hearing peers; she just called everyone "my friend." Having the photo book this year has made a huge difference in the depth of our day-to-day discussions about what happened in school. In time,

the school officials and I truly became Rosalee's IEP team: a group of individuals each bringing his or her own insights, knowledge, and aspirations for Rosalee to share with each other. It didn't happen overnight; it happened slowly as I realized knowledge and grace together can be a powerful tool.

In Matthew 10:16 of the New Testament, we are cautioned to be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves. Every mom I know goes into IEP meetings with a binder of material—usually ginormous—about their children and their children's education. It is our sword and shield. Knowledge

can be a powerful tool, I learned. However, if we are to make measurable and consistent progress across a school system, we must put down our binders, look across the table, and see the humanity sitting there. *Us* and *them* must become *we*. I can't do much on my own, but together we can change the world ... one child at a time.

When I picture the end of Rosalee's journey through public school, I see all of us there at her high school graduation, watching her walk across the stage, passing around the Kleenex—and getting ready for the biggest graduation party ever!



Above: The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Class invited Mr. and Mrs. Claus to read *The Night Before Christmas* and take Christmas requests from each child. (Mr. and Mrs. Claus were Mike and Sherrill Self, both deaf.)



Left: One of the outcomes of our meetings was that the school post signs throughout the building showing the ASL sign for each room/office—Art Room, Principal's Office, etc. The hearing students use this a ton!

Parent to Parent: Tips for Advocacy

By Traci Penland

The following tips, many of them learned from my participation in Hands & Voices, may be helpful to parents. For more information, check out the Hands & Voices website, www.handsandvoices.org.

- 1. Get informed.** Without information, we cannot advocate effectively. We need to know what the law—the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—promises our deaf and hard of hearing children. We need to understand the layout and language of an IEP and be able to craft and work with our child’s communication plan, and we need to know that the law is on our side. The best way to do this is through the *Hands & Voices Educational Advocacy Guidebook*, available on its website.
- 2. Involve Dad.** Most of the time, Mom does the research and works with teachers and officials from the school, but Dad’s participation is important, too. Okay, I know it’s frustrating for moms like me, but I’ve seen it again and again: when Dad shows up at the meeting, the school system takes note and ramps up its vigilance and responsiveness. Dad’s attendance at the IEP meeting is a signal to the school that this child’s education is important to everyone in the family. In my case, having Dad—my husband—was helpful not only because he is my daughter’s dad but because he is my trusted partner. My shins have been the recipient of what I call “a good kicking” (and what is actually a gentle nudge) from my husband. It’s his way of letting me know, “We get it; let’s move on now.” Further, a partner can share the role of asking for clarification when it’s needed and provide another person in the room to say, “So, by accommodations, you mean things you are going to do to help our daughter?”
- 3. Wear many hats.** Like most important relationships, the relationship with our school should be multifaceted. Sometimes we need to bring the latest research, and sometimes we need to bring brownies—a tip I learned from Lisa Kovacs, Hands & Voices director of programs. Sometimes our tone needs to convey the seriousness of our request, and sometimes we need to be silly and laugh. This doesn’t mean we should say one thing to the teacher and another to the director of special education; it means that every situation will require a thoughtful and appropriate response. Don’t go in guns blazing for the next request if the school has just given you something you asked for. This leads to the next tip.
- 4. Show gratitude.** It is important to not just feel but to show gratitude. There have been times when our school has agreed to our request, and it was only months later that I realized how big a deal it was, how many people and things had to move around to make it happen. Gratitude can be shown meaningfully in different ways: Etsy stars may want to spend a couple of nights in the garage fashioning leather engraved phone cases for the IEP team; photographers may want to take artful pictures of the school campus or (with permission) make a poster of the deaf and hard of hearing students to give to the teacher. For me, skilled only in shopping, a breakfast platter from Panera makes a great morning gift for the staff. The teachers and staff serve the students all year long, so don’t wait for the end of the year to treat; sprinkle gratitude throughout the year.
- 5. See the best in others.** We all know that teachers and administrators are overworked and underpaid. Their caseload keeps growing, but their support doesn’t. It is exhausting spending all day trying to balance the demands of parents and the school board. If something upsetting happens, go to the responsible person, give the person the benefit of the doubt, and get his or her side of the story. Don’t e-mail the principal. Ask the person for specific ways he or she can be supported, and then do it. Know that most individuals on the IEP team especially are likely going above and beyond, and they care about our children as much as we do. Walk in ready to collaborate. Of course, there is a time for due process, the legal recourse that the law gives parents. We must be grateful for this option, but recognize that it is the last option, and the *least good* option.