BC HANDS & VOICES

February 2012 - Issue No. 9

BC Hands & Voices is a parent-driven, non-profit organization dedicated to supporting families with children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

We are a parent/professional collaborative group that is unbiased towards communication modes and methods, believing that families will make the best choices for their child if they have access to good information and support.

Our goal is to support families in achieving successful outcomes for their children.

A Whole New World

My Journey into Gallaudet

By Felicia D'Amato

When I was two years old I was diagnosed with a severe to profound hearing loss. I was the first deaf person my parents had ever met. Decisions had to be made, and my parents made the best decisions they knew how for me at the time: they fitted me with hearing aids, enrolled me in speech therapy, and chose to mainstream me. My main mode of communication with my world was through speech, and through lip-reading.

Growing up, I never really complained much about my hearing loss. Truth is, I didn't spend much time thinking that I had one. I lip-read fairly well, and save for an FM-System and my hearing aids, as well as hearing resource teachers, I didn't really see myself as any different than my peers. I really wanted to fit in with the world I was in, which was the hearing world and the only world I knew of at the time. There were times when I would be assertive, like if I was to watch a movie, I knew to ask for closed captions, and I knew to explain to people that I was lip-reading them. (The lip-reading part got me friends in school, especially when people realized it was an extremely useful tool in eavesdropping, but one I tried not to participate in too much – people deserved their privacy.)

I did okay in school – I excelled at reading, writing and social studies, but in math and science I fell behind. I was an okay student, and I did what I had to do to get by. I did love school, but I never looked forward to it, simply because it was both frustrating and exhausting in terms of how much work it was to keep up to hear.

My frustration was at an all-time high when in high school, my hearing loss took a turn for the worse and I was no longer getting by on my own: my hearing that I had couldn't support me anymore. It was at that point an interpreter was assigned to me. Having a sign language interpreter there was the first time I really accessed everything I had been missing out on – PA announcements, movies that weren't captioned, what students were saying in the back of the room. Although at the time I was not fluent in sign language, I understood everything my sign language interpreter was saying (she signed a mixture of ASL and English); I really believe that people who are hard of hearing or deaf are amazing adapters and that our brains autonomously adjust to things we know will help us communicate.

After high school, I enrolled at the Youth in Transition Program provided by the Provincial Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, where I met other deaf youth who signed and had a counsellor who supported me in my educational pursuits. It was then that I learned about Gallaudet University – the world's only school for the deaf and hard of hearing teaching exclusively in American Sign Language (ASL). It is thanks to my hearing resource teacher in my final years of high school and the Deaf community in Vancouver who supported and encouraged me in my pursuit of immersing myself in ASL that I drew the courage to transfer to Gallaudet University.

Gallaudet isn't like any other place I've ever gone to. For me, it encapsulates everything that Aladdin and Jasmine were singing about in their movie, about a whole new world. Especially the part about no one to tell us "no", because at Gallaudet, everything is completely accessible, on a level I never knew was possible. Gone are the days of PA announcements being inaccessible – they're done on a TV screen in sign language. Everything is taught in Sign Language directly, and the class discussions that were always hard for me to be a part of suddenly become engaging and entertaining, everyone signing.

One of my fondest memories of Gallaudet is one of the first days of classes when I transferred in and the teacher had announced we were watching a movie. I unconsciously raised my hand to ask the question I had been asking my entire life: is the movie closed captioned? After I asked, I caught myself in a smile as everyone around me looked at me and laughed with me: of course it was. This was a school where everyone was like me. Where we weren't "hard of hearing" or "deaf" or "disabled", we were students having our dreams come true, within a world that wasn't stopping us. Teachers actually know you by name, and the biggest class size I've had was with 20 people. I've become a better public speaker because so many of our classes require presentations where we receive feedback and support from both teachers and peers.

It's been said that an education isn't worth a great deal if it teaches you how to make a living, but not how to make a life (unknown). At Gallaudet, I find this has come to be true. Gallaudet's teaching doesn't end when classes are over, it stretches on, to the cafeteria lunches and dinners where you can engage with your peers in accessible communication and sometimes out -of- this-world debates. The typical late night college study sessions consist of music – songs are signed in ASL combining both worlds into one. Fire alarms that consist of flashing lights instead of sound, proving you don't always need to hear in an emergency.

Before Gallaudet, I was an average student, never really putting the time into school to excel. At Gallaudet, however, that all changed. I've joined a sorority. I've taken amazing classes like the BioPsychoSocial Aspect of HIV/AIDS. I have been on the Dean's List for several semesters and have won several scholarships. I even got to participate in a federal internship.

I care about my education now, because it's accessible to me and I have people around me who challenge me daily without a language barrier. I met one of my best friends through the Honours Program at Gallaudet, and we continuously push each other to become better scholars as well as people; she's now pursuing her doctorate degree, and every time I'm not sure I can do it or I start to doubt myself, I remind myself that she has set the bar higher and that I should too.

I have met some of the most incredible people at Gallaudet. They have taught me patience, kindness and resilience. When I have doubted myself, they were there, picking me up, encouraging me in a way that I have never had before, because they know what it's like to both hear, and to not. Sometimes, no explanation is necessary, because they've been in my exact shoes before. And they inspire me, because for the first time in a long time, I know that I'm not alone.

My time at Gallaudet is coming to an end, but I won't forget the lessons I've learned and I cherish every moment I have spent there. I don't simply feel like I'm leaving a college, I feel like I'm leaving a home. Gallaudet has instilled in me a pride for being deaf and hard of hearing. I take comfort in knowing that I have been to a whole new world, one that is filled with beautiful hands and beautiful dreams, and the knowledge that nothing is impossible if you know how to make a life and not just a living.

Fall Parent Workshop

By Anja Rosenke

On October 22, 2011, BC Hands & Voices held its 3rd annual Fall Workshop at BC Family Hearing Resource Society in Surrey. It was an honour to have Angela Clancy, Executive Director of the Family Support Institute, lead the workshop. The focus this year was on the brothers and sisters of our children with hearing loss. Parents listened to a presentation and took part in discussions on how to build healthy sibling relationships within their families and meet each child's own unique needs.

Angela shared with the group some valuable insights into sibling dynamics and offered practical tips to employ at home. She included endearing personal anecdotes about her own experiences, growing up with a brother who has special needs. Two "seasoned" parents, April Cowley and Anja Rosenke, were each invited to speak of their journey in raising their children when one is deaf or hard of hearing. Throughout the day, attendees joined in the dialogue by sharing their own colourful stories with the group, which complimented the subject material presented by Angela. The opportunity to learn from Angela Clancy as well as from other parents that day proved to be an empowering combination for all.

Setting the stage for the day's discussions, Angela began with the idea of becoming travellers to each other's worlds and to utilize this perspective in communicating. For example, I must be sensitive not to impose "my world" when I'm visiting "your world". There will be time to visit "my world" afterwards. It was a strong message and a positive one, establishing how important it is to honour and respect each person's viewpoint and ideas. Upon this premise we can teach our children to tell their stories and talk about their feelings, thus opening up the channels of communication and strengthening relationships.

Along those same lines, the concept of active listening was a common thread throughout the day's talks, as listening is the first step to establishing communication. Clancy spoke of being "physically present", demonstrating body language that is open and accepting, being attentive and hearing the person out. As parents, it is important not only to model this ourselves, but to teach our children these important social skills as well.

Helping our children become proficient communicators first means teaching them to hear each other, and naturally age appropriate approaches need to be considered. One parent suggested the "Bug and Wand" technique whereby the children face each other and take turns telling the other "It bugs me

Photos courtesy of BC Hands & Voices Dad Ron Preer when (you do such and such)", followed by "I wish (you would…)". A simple and visually strong technique, I have already found success in prompting my 4- and 6-year-old children to use it at home!

Angela also touched upon some of the concerns that brothers and sisters may internalize as siblings to a child with a disability, such as embarrassment, a sense of isolation, resentment, an obligation to care-give and worry about the future. Again, the idea of building strong open lines of communication with the siblings to address and work through such feelings is imperative.

As parents, we need to provide a safe environment for siblings to open up about negative feelings or to ask tough questions about their brother or sister's disability. In other words, if the sibling feels embarrassed and "wishes their little brother wasn't deaf", our role is integral to expelling the guilt or fear from these thoughts and make it ok for siblings to air their feelings.

Clancy stressed that families should keep having conversations so resentment doesn't build. Having said that, she also pointed out that we should explain to our children that while it's ok to be mad at your brother/sister, it's not ok to say mean things or to blame the disability. That is something that he/she cannot change. It's a non-negotiable and teaching respect between siblings is key.

Another issue that came up was the role that brothers and sisters often play in translating for their Deaf/HoH sibling. Sometimes they do it out of necessity, but in other cases the sibling instinctively takes on this responsibility.

Angela spoke from personal experience when she added that this can be a lot of pressure for a child to assume. She suggested that families "bring others into the circle" by teaching those who interact with your Deaf/HoH child – even extended family members – some of the main signs your child uses, and if speech isn't intelligible, what certain sounds or phrases represent. Clancy recommended we give the sibling a choice in how much and in what fashion they want to participate, but not to impose expectations. This too is an ongoing conversation to have.

Some of the other take-away ideas Angela presented centered around conflict resolution and problem-solving between siblings – topics relevant to any familial household on any given day. These included reminders for parents to set clear expectations surrounding acceptable behaviour, to give consequences and ensure follow-through. Involving your children in the process of setting 'house rules' or assigning chores can be powerful (what do you think is fair?). And finding solutions together means that children will not only feel involved, but also be accountable.

Of course with any household decision-making or settling of disputes, parents should ensure that the Deaf/HoH child is included in the conversation. Sometimes, this calls for restructuring the environment so that information is accessible to that child. First and foremost, have them be present. Take steps to provide the information at their level of understanding. Employing visual aids like a calendar, a flow chart with pictures or an experience book about `Yes/No Behaviour' can be highly effective.

When children face disagreement, Clancy cautioned against stepping in too soon and stressed the value in allowing children to learn to work through their differences independently. Several times throughout the day, talks came back to the idea of treating the child with the disability 'just like the others'; that is, levelling the playing field between siblings. Within reason of course, parents should try to suppress the impulse to protect or shelter the child with the disability at times and let them work it out for themselves.

Studies have shown that siblings of children with disability often develop strong qualities of tolerance and compassion. They may be more certain about their own future goals – both personal and vocational. Children who grow up with a brother or sister who has special needs are often more aware of the consequences of prejudice and orient themselves towards humanitarian interests as adults. Certainly, they develop an increased understanding of others.

And it all starts at home. Adopting an attitude of acceptance and pursuing it through open communication is clearly a foundation for building strong, trustful and positive relationships between siblings within the family. As parents, the task is ours – the opportunity is ours – to shape our home environment and guide our familial interactions to that end. A final thought to contemplate is a term that Angela mentioned that day: DIVERSABILITY over DISABILITY. We are more alike than different after all.

Thank you to all the attendees, volunteers and board members who helped to make the day such a success.

BC Hands & Voices also wishes to extend a big thank you to Angela Clancy for helping us navigate this part of our journey in raising our children.

We'd like to express our gratitude to the following organizations for their financial and/or in-kind support:
Preferred Interpreting
BC Family Hearing Resource Society
BC Early Hearing Program
BC Children's Hospital Family Support Groups/ Networks Funding Committee
Gwyn Morgan & Patricia Trottier Foundation
Family Support Institute

Want to learn more about The Family Support Institute, BC Hands & Voices or sibling relationships? Please check out the following links:
www.bchandsandvoices.com
www.handsandvoices.org/comcon/articles/pdfs/siblings.pdf
www.familysupportbc.com
www.deafwellbeing.vch.ca

If you missed the workshop, look out for the recorded version coming soon to a computer near you…

Another article about siblings that might be of interest to those who attended our Fall Workshop – and also for those who did not...

A WORD ABOUT SODAS… SIBLINGS NOT POP

By: Chris Mayworm, M.S., RCC (Registered Clinical Counsellor)

Printed on page 25 of the Family Network for Deaf Children (FNDC) Winter Newsletter (http://www.fndc.ca/files/pdf/newsletters/2011_winter_nl_fndc.pdf)

Editor's Note: FNDC puts out a fantastic newsletter, full of great information – you might want to take a look!

Hands & Voices Parent Coffee Nights

Mark your calendar and we'll save you a spot on the couch!

Are you interested in getting to know other parents of kids with hearing loss?
Would you like to share ideas on how to support your child with hearing loss?
Or do you just want to come out and enjoy a night off with coffee, treats and good conversation?

If so, this is the group for you.

We held our first Parent Coffee Night on November 26th with great success. Gathered on couches, we enjoyed coffee/tea and homemade baking. The group had a great time getting to know one another. We chatted about navigating the transition from early intervention into the school system, and also about available options in case the choice we made for school placement is not working as we had hoped.

In 2012 we will be meeting regularly, one Monday a month from January to June at Victory Hill - House #3 from 7-9pm. (*look for the blue & orange balloons)

The address is 4334 Victory St, Burnaby, BC. Thank you to Services for Family & Community Development for allowing us to use this space.

Mark these dates on your calendar!

January 16th - How to talk about hearing loss with friends, family and strangers
February - no meeting
March 5th - Your child's identity and hearing loss – how to encourage confidence
April 16th - Literacy
May 21st - How to advocate for your child and yet encourage their independence
June 18th - Back by popular demand - Transitioning to Kindergarten

Contact Jennifer Towers at jtowers900@gmail.com with any questions. We hope to see you there.

Crash Crawly's is Back!

Family Fun at Crash Crawly's, sponsored by Family Network for Deaf Children, B.C. Hands and Voices and CHHA B.C. Parents' Branch is back again in 2012 by popular demand! The event will be held on Sunday March 4th, 2012 from 10am-1pm, and the cost will be $3 per person.

Families with hard of hearing or deaf children/teens and children of deaf adults, along with their parents, are all welcome. Snacks will be available for purchase at the concession.

Look out for more details on this popular event at bchandsandvoices.com and our Facebook page.

It's Time to Renew Your Membership

It's time to renew your membership! Please show your support for BC Hands & Voices by mailing in your membership fees ($15 for an individual or family, $25 for an agency).

Our registration form is available online at bchandsandvoices.com/sign-up.

Paid members of BC Hands & Voices receive a colour printed copy of our BC newsletter as well as the larger Hands & Voices newspaper, called the Communicator, 3 times per year. We are a non-profit charitable organization, and depend on donations and membership fees – these allow us to offer workshops, family events, and maintain our website (bchandsandvoices.com).

Please send your cheque, made out to BC Hands & Voices, to:

BC Hands & Voices
5513 Parker Ave
Victoria BC
V8Y 2N2

BC Hands & Voices is a parent-driven, non-profit organization dedicated to supporting families with children who are D/deaf or hard of hearing. We are a parent/professional collaborative group that is unbiased towards communication modes and methods, believing that families will make the best choices for their child if they have access to good information and support. Our goal is to support families in achieving successful outcomes for their children.