

## COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE EXPOSURE KEY TO SON'S SUCCESS:

# A Mother Reflects

*By Brenda Perrodin*

My son Emmanuel wants to go to medical school. He is currently in his third year of college. Already he is amassing an impressive vita, studying for the Medical College Admission Test, working in clinical settings ... and hoping.

Emmanuel was born deaf with a hole in his heart. Both of these statistically unlikely characteristics have brought unexpected richness to his life, and perhaps the heart situation was the one that caused us the most grief. We have learned that the heart of every fetus has a small hole. This allows the blood from the mother, with its rich oxygen content, to enter the small growing body inside of her. At birth the hole (blood vessel) generally closes, but in his case this didn't happen. This resulted in a heart problem called, as Emmanuel reminds me, patent ductus arteriosus and required heart surgery to resolve it.

Emmanuel went to the hospital for the operation when he was 10 years old. He peppered Dr. Rachel St. John, whom we had known for several years, with questions. He wanted to know about his condition, and he wanted the details of the surgery. He asked so many questions that Dr. St. John told him he should become a doctor himself. He made up his mind right then. He would do it. He would become a doctor. Emmanuel has never deviated from this goal.

From the first days, Emmanuel was a top student. I had read to him when he was small, and he began to read on his own while in Kendall Demonstration Elementary School, on the campus of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. He read everything he could get his hands on. After his conversation with Dr. St. John, his reading accelerated and deepened, a pattern that continued when he entered the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD), also on the Gallaudet campus.

In both schools, Emmanuel won multiple awards. Some of the awards were cash, and we put the money away to cover college costs. At MSSD, he joined the Diversity Club to learn more about his African American identity and to show interest in his community. He became more outspoken about what he believed was right and the

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*Photos courtesy of Brenda Perrodin*



importance of appreciation for others and for diversity in our American society. His desire to participate in his community led to his work in the Student Body Government.

As a sophomore, Emmanuel joined MSSD's Academic Bowl team, which competed in the National Academic Bowl for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students, and he and his team earned second place. During his junior year, he became the team captain. While the team lost in the regionals that year, Emmanuel remained captain. The following year, he led his school to victory in both the regional and the national competitions.

When Emmanuel graduated from high

school, both Gallaudet University and the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) courted him; both schools seemed ready with scholarships. Emmanuel said he chose RIT because it had the best pre-med program "with a record of success." He also wanted to live away from home for a while, and to experience a Deaf community that was different from the one in which he had grown up.

As an RIT student, Emmanuel competed in the National Association of the Deaf's College Bowl. With him on its team, RIT won for the third year in a row.

**Clockwise from left:** Emmanuel (left) at KDES; Perrodin helps her son with schoolwork; Emmanuel and his Academic Bowl team with MSSD principal Mindi Failing; Emmanuel (holding Emma) and Perrodin check MSSD's Academic Bowl team's standing.





**Left:** Salutorian for MSSD's Class of 2014, Emmanuel (right) addresses his graduating classmates and the audience.

## Parents Make the Critical Difference

Parents often marvel at Emmanuel's success and even ask me how "I" did it. Of course I did not do it; he did. However, this doesn't mean that parenting was irrelevant. In fact, as a person who works with young deaf and hard of hearing children and their parents every day, I know that parenting is critical. Parents often ask me what is most important—if there is a special key—to enabling their deaf and hard of hearing children to achieve academic success and self-fulfillment. I tell them that absolutely there is a special key: Language exposure. I was a single mom for a while, but I always made sure that we—Emmanuel, my daughter Emma, and I—talked with each other. I always had books in our home, and every week I would whisk Emmanuel and Emma to museums and other cultural events. We also credit success to the ease of communication that occurs when parents and children use the same language, in our case (American Sign Language). There were no communication barriers. Wants, needs, stories, and jokes were easily shared.

We were lucky, too. We met Dr. St. John—the doctor who encouraged Emmanuel to explore the medical field—when he was only 2 years old. My family was returning from a conference, talking on a plane as we headed back to our home, when a woman in the seat behind us interrupted us. It was Dr. St. John. She was trying to set up a clinic for deaf and hard of hearing toddlers at Georgetown University Hospital in response to the Early Hearing Detection and Intervention legislation that mandates hearing testing of every newborn in the United States. She signed beautifully, and she said that she needed some help. Would we be interested in advising her? Of course! We worked with her for several years. This contact proved enriching both for her and for me and my son. She has since moved to Texas, but we keep in touch.

The summer before high school, Emmanuel had his first clinical experience. I have a good friend, Julia Ingram, who helped him find a job working with a doctor who treats the eye, foot, hand, and gallbladder at the SurgCenter of Southern Maryland in Clinton. Soon after that, Emmanuel

sought out placements on his own. When he learned that my sister (his Aunt Mary) had a fiancé who had a sister who was a doctor, he made the contact and asked about shadowing her at work throughout his winter break.

As a third-year college student, Emmanuel is so busy. This is his second semester working as a teaching assistant of organic chemistry. He works as part of a group of deaf teaching assistants who give weekly workshops and review

sessions for deaf and hard of hearing students. He has two jobs on campus, serving as an American Sign Language consultant for interpreters and other access service providers in the Department of Access Services in RIT/National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), and as student researcher in the NTID Center on Cognition and Language's Deaf Health Lab. He joined the RIT Honors Program last semester.

Emmanuel also worked as a student research assistant in the Department of Biochemistry and Cellular and Molecular Biology at the University of Tennessee. That position culminated in a presentation at the department's End-of-Summer Symposium. The topic of this presentation? Trust me . . . my son's work is so specialized that most people don't even try to understand it, but his presentation involved the effects of a virus that causes molting and discoloration of tobacco plants on other plants. Titled "Integrative Effects of the Tobacco Mosaic Virus on ISE2-Overexpressed Plants," it was the culmination of seven weeks of research in the lab under the supervision of doctoral candidates and post-doctoral fellows.

Emma is interested in more “hands-on” experiences than her brother and she is hard of hearing, so we are following a different plan for her education. Each child is different, and the differences are to be treasured. Of course both children have our support—as I had my parents’ support.

We are part of a large African American family that can trace its deaf ancestors back six generations. I am deaf, as is my mom, six of my seven sisters and brothers, and several extended family members. We were raised in Grand Coteau, a small town near Lafayette, Louisiana, known for its Cajun heritage. My mother grew up using French within her family and is trilingual in French, English, and American Sign Language. She went to school during the days of segregation, and she was among the first African American students to integrate into the Louisiana School for the Deaf.

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My mother never went to college, but she instilled in her children the belief that we could achieve if we worked hard. When I wanted to go away to study at

Gallaudet University, she encouraged me. Gallaudet was an eye opener. There is no experience like it. I wanted to work with young children and when I graduated, and I stayed on campus to get my master’s degree in early childhood education. I’ve taught in the Parent-Infant Program—with the youngest deaf and hard of hearing children who are just beginning their lives and learning—at KDES for 20 years.

I’m so proud of both of my children. They are at different stages in their lives and excel in different areas, but for both Emmanuel and Emma communication and language exposure throughout their early years built the foundation for what we have today. At 19, busy with college and preparing for medical school, Emmanuel texts me daily and I text him, too. Emma is moving ahead and making me proud. Language exposure and communication remain key to my children’s success.

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