

# Massachusetts Offers Trilingual Reading Saturdays to Increase Reading Skills and Confidence

By Kathleen M. Vesey

*“We look at and read books more thoroughly now.”\**

*“Hardly any more frustration between adult and child.”*

*“We LOVE having books that we know how to sign the story. We like to have ideas for discussion and the ability to talk about the book in ASL.”*

*“The program helps parents and children communicate better.”*

These comments affirm the experiences of so many of the families of the deaf and hard of hearing children who come to Shared Reading Saturdays at Northern Essex Community College (NECC) in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The program, which includes monthly gatherings and is coordinated by the NECC’s Gallaudet University Regional Center, features deaf individuals helping hearing parents learn how to read with their children in American Sign Language (ASL) in response to research that indicates young children whose families read with them on a regular basis do better academically and achieve more success in school (Trelease, 2001).

Approximately 12 families from throughout the Greater Merrimack Valley region of Massachusetts attend the program. The children range in age from infancy to 11 years old. They are joined by their parents and siblings—and often by their grandparents, aunts, and uncles. The sessions give the adults the communication tools to read with their children, and organizers hope that they do so multiple times per week.

*Photos courtesy of Kathleen M. Vesey*

**Kathleen M. Vesey**, MBA, MA, is the recently retired director of the Gallaudet University Regional Center (GURC) at Northern Essex Community College (NECC), a position she held for 27 years. She holds master’s degrees from Boston University and Gallaudet University and a bachelor’s degree from Regis College. Vesey has served on a number of boards and advisory committees in the Deaf community, including the Massachusetts Newborn Hearing Advisory Committee. Under her tenure, the NECC GURC provided creative programs for families with children who are deaf or hard of hearing, including the Family Sign Language Program and Shared Reading Saturdays, both of which are accessible for families who speak Spanish and English. In her spare time, Vesey can be found on the golf course or kayaking on the rivers of New England.

For more information about the above-mentioned programs, visit [www.necc.mass.edu/gallaudet](http://www.necc.mass.edu/gallaudet).



**Left:** Kellynette Gomez and her mother, Jackie, in 2005 not long after they began participating in Shared Reading Saturdays.

year, and we have had time to see some of our children move on to middle school, high school, and college. Kellynette Gomez, who attended with her mom, Jackie Gomez, went to college at Gallaudet University, graduated, and is today employed in the human services field as a community involvement and program liaison at Springfield College in Massachusetts. Kellynette and her family were among the first to participate in Shared Reading Saturdays. She began as an elementary school student and continued to participate

through high school, when she served as a volunteer to assist with the children’s activities.

“It was a real confidence booster,” Kellynette remembered, “knowing that my family members, especially my mom, [learned] how to read a book in sign language. Those Saturdays were some of the best times, and when I look back I realize that many of those folks were my guiding light in getting to where I am today.”

Kellynette felt that the experience improved her reading comprehension and her ASL skills. It also helped her socialize. “I was mainstreamed in the public schools,” she said. “A majority of my classes were in a hearing environment, so without these monthly [Shared Reading] Saturdays, I am not sure that ... my Deaf identity would have been as strong.”

Her mother agreed, finding that the whole family benefitted from the program. Noted Mrs. Gomez:

*As a parent [I found] a program that not only teaches parents to read in ASL to their children but is also a place to connect and socialize with other families in the community. The Shared Reading Saturdays program has helped me to grow as a parent, and I feel more prepared to deal with my daughter’s deafness.*

Other parents record similar feelings. Notes Ursula Millard, mother of a daughter who uses sign language:

*We [parents] benefit greatly from this wonderful program. It gives us the opportunity to meet other families who have hard of*

We begin with light refreshments. Then the deaf and hard of hearing children and their siblings assemble by age to participate in organized activities with volunteers and staff related to a book that has been selected for the month. At the same time, adult family members meet with a deaf instructor and learn to read the story out loud and use ASL. The instructor models reading using ASL and provides additional information related to reading to deaf and hard of hearing children (Schleper, 1997).

Following the instruction, the families break into small groups and practice signing the story with the assistance of a deaf tutor. When practice time is over, the children join their families to read the story together. The deaf tutors observe and then offer tips on reading in ASL, communicating with the deaf and hard of hearing children, and storytelling.

Three languages are used during the program: English, ASL, and Spanish. The program was designed both for families who use English and families who use Spanish in their homes. Interpreters are available to translate ASL into Spanish as well as English. Presentations occur in all three languages simultaneously through the use of FM systems with headphones. Each family member wears a headphone and chooses the English or Spanish channel on the FM system. The use of the FM system with headphones allows for equal access and respect for both spoken languages; no language is viewed as dominant over the other.

The program is now in its thirteenth

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*bearing or deaf children. We have learned what other families are doing with their children ... and [have helped] them to advocate for themselves. We have learned how to read with our hard of hearing daughter in more interesting and fun ways.*

Educators reported that students who participated in Shared Reading Saturdays performed differently in class. Lorna Davidson-Connelly, a retired school counselor from the Lawrence Public Schools who has been a program volunteer for many years, recalls how student enjoyment of the program affects other aspects of their lives:

*One of our elementary students loves to retell stories and present what she learned at Shared Reading with her classmates. She displays good retention of classifiers and vocabulary. The student was also thrilled her family was taking an interest and the time to learn sign language, which helps with communication at home.*

Further, families report increasing the number of times they read with their children, from once or twice a week when they begin the program to three to five times a week at the program's completion. Family members note that the program helps their signing skills because instruction is tailored to families with young children, but they also say that the program affirms that they do not have to be fluent signers, and they find this a source of relief. The program gives them the skills and confidence to read books—a wider variety of books and on an increased basis—with their children.

Parents have told us that the extended family members who participated often remain close to their deaf or hard of hearing child years later. New families join each year. As some of the deaf and hard of hearing children became older, they, like Kellynette, join the ranks of our volunteers and assist with the younger children's activities.

While parents have noted growth in their children as they participate in the program, sometimes the children—as they grow—note changes in their parents as well. Kellynette remarked:

*It was amazing to watch my mother become an advocate for me and other deaf/hard of hearing children in the public school system. Oftentimes, my mom would take the role as a bilingual interpreter to give access to Spanish-speaking families. [She] also acted as a resource for families who have deaf children; providing them with information about school, the Individualized Education Program ... and much more.*

An important part of the program is the lunch that families

enjoy together. Family members have often commented in our surveys about the importance of interacting with other families who have the experience of raising a deaf or hard of hearing child. Networking is fostered.

We also welcome families whose children, though hearing, utilize sign language to communicate. In welcoming hearing siblings, the program becomes one of the very limited resources in which families can see all their children—deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing—learning and socializing together using sign language.

Shared Reading Saturdays, an adaptation of the Shared Reading Project that was initiated in 2004 by what was originally the GURC-Northeast (now the GURC-East) and the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, has found new sources of support. We have been fortunate to have funding from several private foundations as well as corporate sponsors for this program. Thanks to this funding, we are able to provide a book bag each month for each family to keep. The book bag includes the storybook of the month in English and Spanish, a DVD of a deaf individual signing the story, and suggested activities related to the story to do at home.

Shared Reading Saturdays has proved to be beneficial to parents and children, to those who use Spanish in their homes as well as those who use English.

It is enabling our deaf and hard of hearing children to lay a solid foundation and increase the chances that as they progress through elementary, middle, and high school and go to college, they will do so as eager and fluent readers.

*\*Quotations in this article come from surveys administered during the Shared Reading program.*



**Left:** Gomez and her family in 2016 on graduation day at Gallaudet University.

## References

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