

Deshonda Washington

is executive director of Georgia's Hands & Voices and program director of Georgia's Advocacy Support & Training (ASTra) Program. Trained as an educational advocate through the ASTra program, Washington is passionate about supporting deaf and hard of hearing families throughout Georgia. She participates on the ASTra committee and has made presentations throughout the state. Her goal is to empower parents and to ensure deaf and hard of hearing children, including those with disabilities, reach their highest potential. Washington is married and has three children—Ashanti, Lauren, and Lorenzo Jr. Lauren, who was born deaf, prepared her for a lifelong journey of advocating. Washington believes in the Hands & Voices motto: "What works for the child is what makes the choice right." She welcomes questions and comments about this article at Deshonda@gahandsandvoices.org.

Georgia Leads Truce in "Language Wars": A Parent Perspective

By Deshonda Washington

Almost 30 years ago, to have a baby who was deaf meant becoming a casualty of what the experts called "the language wars of deaf education." I know because that is when my daughter was born. Today things are different—and I hope that they continue to change.

For every parent, at least every hearing parent, having a child who is deaf or hard of hearing presents a challenge, especially since in most cases (as was the case with us) the deaf child is the first deaf human being that the parent has ever known. With no preparation, we must figure out how to raise our offspring—more precious to us than ourselves and so different—in the best way possible. How do we communicate? How do we share our family history and heritage? How do we ensure our child's education? How do we share our love? We turn to experts—the doctors, audiologists, therapists, teachers, counselors—who have studied the issues of hearing loss from multiple angles and worked with deaf and hard of hearing people in a variety of capacities, and we find that they disagree. They disagree vehemently.

Some experts believe that deaf children should be raised through speech and lipreading; these experts negate the use of sign language. Other experts believe that deaf children should be raised through the immediate and primary use of American Sign Language (ASL); these experts negate the use of amplification. My home life reflected this division. We were "a house divided."

Photos courtesy of Deshonda Washington



My husband heard about cochlear implants, the device that revolutionized hearing—at least for some deaf people—by administering electrical impulses directly to the cochlea through an implanted device. He wanted our daughter, Lauren, who was born deaf, to have an implant; he wanted her to hear and speak. I felt differently. I believed that Lauren was deaf because God made her that way. We should not try to make her adapt to our world. We should immerse ourselves in her world, not have her try to immerse herself in ours. My husband won the battle. Lauren received her implant at 2 ½ years old.

Our journey took a turn into the exclusive use of listening and speaking, promoted by the oral camp. We made sure that Lauren received all services, the limousine of services. We had in-home physical and occupational therapists, and speech therapists from a highly sought-after speech school in New Jersey. We invested as fully as possible in our oral journey, and we worked with Lauren constantly. Still, it didn't seem to be working.

Above (top row): Lauren, age 3; age 5 with classmates at the Lake Drive Deaf/Hard of Hearing Program in Mountain Lakes, NJ; **(bottom row):** Lauren, age 12; with her father after a basketball game at the Georgia School for the Deaf; receiving a “Student of the Month” award from the Optimist Club in Rome, Georgia.

Lauren wasn't speaking at the rate we had anticipated, and I began to get worried. Children need to communicate, and Lauren and I were not communicating. Against her speech therapist's recommendation, I started learning signs and incorporating sign language into her life. I didn't care about the disagreements of experts. I saw what Lauren needed. She could sometimes make sense of sounds and she was developing good speech skills, but for full access in the educational realm she needed signs. Our journey changed after I realized that. As opposed to speech and lipreading alone, signs made a quick and profound difference in Lauren's understanding and communication. This would be especially true for her education—where every word needed to be



Left: Washington (second from left) with her family (Lorenzo Jr., Lorenzo Sr., Ashanti, and Lauren).

director of the Atlanta Speech School, and Kenney Moore, director of the Division of State Schools for the Georgia Department of Education,

announced the need

to form a community of practice focused on those involved with the education of deaf and hard of hearing children. Individuals from the Georgia Department of Public Health, the Georgia Department of Education, public and private early interventionists, parents, and deaf and hard of hearing adults met and set aside the differences that emerged over communication philosophies. We agreed that literacy and language are a fundamental right of deaf and hard of hearing children, and that we would work to support this—no matter how a child or a child’s family preferred to communicate. The result is the Georgia Pathway to Language and Literacy, a community of practice that

serves as a professional network for individuals involved with education of deaf and hard of hearing children and as a repository of knowledge about the education of deaf and hard of hearing children. Whether children, adults, or their families use ASL or spoken language is irrelevant; all are welcomed.

Hands & Voices—The Pioneers of Change

This mirrors the philosophy of what we pioneered at Hands & Voices, an organization developed and driven by parents of children who are deaf or hard of hearing. We insist that the child—not the ideology—should be the center of educational planning, and that parental communication choice, whatever it is, should be supported. As parents of deaf and hard of hearing children, we use ASL, Cued Speech, signed English, Total Communication, and speech- and lipreading, but we share the interest of wanting the best for our children. As our website says, what we value most is a well-adjusted and successful kid.

Some of our children receive amplification and do extremely well in mainstream educational settings, even without receiving special education services. This is still a small percentage of the deaf and hard of hearing students here in Georgia, though the numbers are steadily increasing. Other children are successful with the use of a sign language interpreter or captioning. Still others, like my Lauren, are successful with the use of special education services to accommodate her needs. Finally, there are children who do best in schools for the deaf where everything is accessible via ASL.

As people learn to appreciate those who support different communication philosophies, I am able to live what I felt so long ago. It is expressed in the model of Hands & Voices: “What works for the child is what makes the choice right!” We have come a long way from almost 30 years ago, and I don’t feel alone anymore.

communicated. However, we did not abandon our journey of listening and speaking. We continued with amplification and speech, and we incorporated sign language.

The experts seemed surprised, almost angry. Twenty years ago, using signs, speech, and amplification seemed to be a revolutionary idea. Parents could pick one communication mode or the other but not both! Sometimes we even felt that the experts looked at us as if we had violated some sacred principle. “How dare you!” they seemed to say.

Fast Forward—Pathways to Change!

Today so much has changed. Children are identified earlier, often at birth, and services kick in quickly. Perhaps just as important, everyone crowds in and gets a seat at the table as educational plans are developed. Speech therapists, audiologists, sign language interpreters, and representatives of the Deaf community put aside their differences and sit down together. Everyone works to understand what is needed for our children to be successful.

Perhaps the changing attitude has already paid off. When Governor Nathan Deal announced plans to have Georgia’s students reading by third grade, the deaf and hard of hearing educational community took up the challenge. Comer Yates, executive

