

My name is Kimberly Silva and my son is Thomas. He is 9 years-old, he is deaf and he has other special needs as well. I also have a set of twins that are 6 years-old, and they are hearing. I am currently serving my second term on the New Mexico Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and I also am a member of the Deaf Education Review Task Force.

Thomas was born prematurely and had a very rough start, to say the least. He spent the first 3 months of his life in the hospital, literally fighting to stay alive. Because of his other issues, he was not identified as being deaf until he was about 8 months old. We were shocked when the audiologist told us, and quite honestly scared out of our minds. We had no prior knowledge or experience with deafness. For that matter, we didn't even know anyone who was deaf or hard of hearing. What we learned was that that 90% of DHH children come from hearing families, and these families are often just as lost and confused as we were.

We quickly starting working through the system connecting with local agencies that offer support, and we began looking for answers, guidance, suggestions, anything that would help us. We discovered that we were right in the middle of a very polarized issue: the oral approach vs. the signing approach. We also found that the existing programs were determined to promote their agendas, whether it benefited the child and the family or not. All we wanted was to be able to communicate with our son, whether it was thru sign language or thru spoken language, we didn't care. Language was the key, communication. Fortunately for us we didn't listen when the "experts" told us not to sign with him, and we continued teaching Thomas ASL and his language flourished.

Thomas started attending NMSD Preschool here in ABQ when he was 2 years-old. It is a program that serves DHH children from age 2 through Kindergarten. When he was about 3, I began to panic as I started thinking about next steps. "What happens when he graduates from Preschool?" I was shocked to find out that the "experts" actually expected me to send my 6 year-old medically fragile son off to a residential school, a school that in reality would not even be able to accommodate him because of his health issues. I began thinking of other families with the same dilemma. Just because our children are deaf does not mean that they have to be shipped off and sent away from their families in order to receive an education.

I began to explore options for Thomas in ABQ and I started familiarizing myself with the facts even more. New Mexico only has about 600 DHH children in the entire state. Approximately 125 of those children attend the state sponsored program, and roughly 160 are served by APS. Keep in mind we are talking about 160 out of 90,000 students, obviously a low incidence population. At the same time the 2003 Deaf Education Task Force Report came out. The information provided in that report literally made us sick to our stomachs. Our DHH children graduate on average with a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level, 30% are functionally illiterate when they leave high school, and only 8% graduate from college. As a parent I was appalled and scared to death, and all I could think was that we have to do more.

I began meeting with experts in the field as well as with top leaders in Santa Fe to discuss the situation. My father-in-law was a State Representative for 22 years so we were lucky in that people were always willing to listen, and they were very sympathetic and supportive. The fact of the matter is they didn't know what the solution was either.

Because I was determined to keep Thomas in ABQ with me and our family, I started working with the NMSD ABQ staff to find new solutions. We suggested the possibility of NMSD expanding their program up to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade even, creating another option here in ABQ for DHH children since NMSD has the resources and we have the population. We were denied. When Thomas was in Kindergarten, the NMSD staff and the APS staff formed a partnership that allowed teachers from the two programs to collaborate and work together with the children. That lasted one year and when the leadership changed, the program dissolved.

We met with APS officials last year including board members, special education directors, governmental liaisons, as well as APS Charter School officials and we discussed the needs of our children and how they were being underserved and overlooked. We told them that we recognized that we are a small group, but our children still deserve a good education. They agreed and said our cause was worthy, and that they would get back to us. We never heard from them. We submitted a proposal to start an Alternative School for our children within APS. We were denied.

Finally, we began researching the possibility of a charter school. When you look at the purposes of charter schools, they speak directly to our DHH children. We are the perfect niche population for a charter school. We want our children to attend a school where they feel confident and proud of their abilities; we want them to feel comfortable in their environment and feel that they actually "belong" at home and at school. Most importantly, we want them to receive a good education and for them to reach their maximum potential. Quite honestly, we simply want our children to be able to read and write. We believe that we can create that environment for our children, and we are only trying to give families of DHH children another option, another way here in ABQ.

You see, we are not trying to close down the state sponsored program. NMSD is the absolute right choice for some families with DHH children. We are not trying to prevent children from using spoken language and being mainstreamed into their neighborhood schools. We are trying to create an environment that is supportive of families; an environment where language is the focus; an environment where there are high expectations for these children; a place that promotes family and community building here in ABQ. Not to mention, I want my hearing twins to sign so that they can communicate with their brother. We must support the entire family.

The exciting and great thing about this opportunity is that our group of families and educators truly recognizes our children's potential. We know how smart and talented and deserving these children are. We also recognize how very difficult our task at hand is, and we are not naive.

Having been around other families for the past nine years listening to their stories, and crying and laughing with them, and watching their children's journeys, I've learned that this is a fabulous group of children with so much to offer the world.

I believe without a shadow of a doubt that I was meant to be Thomas' mom. I know that I was meant to stand up and fight the good fight; that I was meant to connect with these wonderful people and embark on this great adventure. The truth of the matter is, my son Thomas will be fine no matter what because we are informed and involved parents, and well aware of our rights, and we will do whatever it takes to help him reach his full potential. Whether it means hiring tutors or deaf role models or sitting in class every day, we will do it for our son. We fight for the OTHER children. The children whose families are merely trying to survive and keep their heads above water; the children whose families are trying to adjust to the fact that they even have a DHH child; the Spanish speaking families who are learning English as well as ASL; the families with special needs children that oftentimes have a list of other health issues to deal with. Those are the children and families we fight for and represent.

We are honored and privileged to come before you and stand up for this group, and we are excited about the possibilities the ASL Academy will offer. We truly see how great it could be, and we are more than willing to do the work because they are our children. We believe that all the pieces have fallen into place for our program. We have top notch Deaf Educators, strong Deaf Community leaders, willing and determined parents, and a group of key stakeholders that are eager to stand up and rally around these children. If ever there was a time that this was going to happen, it is and should be now. We cannot continue to accept mediocrity; we cannot allow another teacher to tell a child, "Say it or point, don't you sign to me!"; we cannot let another child feel badly about themselves because they use sign language; we cannot continue to do the same things over and over again and expect different results. We cannot fail another generation of DHH children.