



Benna Hull Timperlake, a

registered nurse, earned her degree at the University of Texas and worked as a nurse for 10 years. She is the mother of three, the oldest of whom was born profoundly deaf. A certified interpreter, Timperlake is a past president of the American Society for Deaf Children, a former member of the Texas Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and a former executive director of The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Center in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Right: Ricky Sanders, Genelle, Roger Timperlake, and Benna smile for the camera shortly after the Texas A&M University graduation ceremony during which Genelle received her master's degree.

Parenting with High Expectations

By Benna Hull Timperlake and Genelle Timperlake Sanders

In the following article, Benna Hull Timperlake, who with husband Roger, raised two hearing children in addition to their deaf daughter, Genelle Timperlake Sanders, and Genelle, now a deaf professional, share their reflections on Genelle's childhood.

Academic Success

Setting Expectations from the Beginning

BENNA HULL TIMPERLAKE: In some ways raising deaf or hard of hearing children is no different than raising hearing children; expectations must be established and periodically tweaked. When Genelle was first identified as deaf at 28 months old, we knew little about Deaf culture, educational opportunities, or sign language. I went to the library and got books for her as well as *They Grow in Silence*, the groundbreaking book by Eugene Mindel and McCay Vernon, for me. That book about deaf children and language development began my realization that hearing loss didn't have to prevent my daughter from achieving academic success. My expectations, formerly unmoored and adrift, were tweaked and re-established. Genelle could learn anything! It just had to be accessible.

In our family, the expectation is that each child finish high school, go to college, and graduate with a well-rounded education. We found out how quickly Genelle could learn after starting to use signs and hearing aids. After four months, Genelle had an expressive vocabulary of over 300 words! Proud parents, we could see that college was a realistic goal for her.

Through her years of primary schooling, Genelle was placed in a variety of academic environments. Each was the correct placement at the time, and each placement had unique problems. We worked outside of the classroom to provide access for Genelle. Using captioned videos at home, I supplemented the early curriculum with repeated exposure to vocabulary. We also tried unique solutions to the ritual of the spelling test and other parts of school that weren't accessible through the eyes. I remember that some teachers welcomed my help, and some wished I would stay away. The perseverance to find out what Genelle needed and to make that accessible helped her make it through high school and prepared her for college academics.

Genelle is now a lifelong learner. She also set a great example for her siblings by finishing her master's degree before they finished their bachelor's degrees!

Photos courtesy of Benna Hull Timperlake



Genelle Timperlake Sanders, the daughter of Roger and Benna Timperlake, is profoundly deaf and communicates using sign, speech, and hearing aids. She received her bachelor's degree in rhetoric from Texas A&M University-College Station and her master's degree in communications from Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. She works full time as head of communications and marketing for a local business; is editor-in-chief of *The Deaf Texan*, a quarterly newsletter distributed by the Texas Association of the Deaf; and serves on the Board of Trustees of The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Center.

The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at bennat@swbell.net and g.tsanders@yahoo.com.

GENELLE TIMPERLAKE SANDERS: My parents' expectations of top grades meant that I had to actively work to be sure I had access to classes and to speak up if I did not. Multiple times I came close to throwing in the towel, frustrated with my lack of access. Sometimes I fought back by using my deafness as an excuse for lousy grades. I am grateful to my parents because they refused to accept either my being denied access or my using this denial as a reason not to achieve. They worked with me to improve situations. As I grew older, they expected me to work with my teachers, identifying what was wrong, what needed to be done, and making sure that it happened. I learned to identify superiors in charge of my education who could help me.

I was in advanced placement in high school, and I became frustrated with interpreters who could not keep up with my level of academics. My parents and I discussed different strategies and went to see the special education director to request interpreters with better skills. I resisted going but the visit was a success, and I realized the benefits once I was placed with a skilled interpreter. My parents' expectations not only assisted my knowledge growth, but "sticking to my guns" increased my confidence.

Transition Begins at Birth Fostering Self-Advocacy and Independence

TIMPERLAKE: Training for independent living starts when we teach babies to express their needs with words instead of tears. I spent hours learning the signs for toileting and for discipline. It was work to stay ahead of Genelle in sign vocabulary, but it was worth it since we couldn't learn anything else until those early skills were mastered! As Genelle grew, I had to keep learning signs to help her become independent at each stage of her growth.

Genelle had to learn self-advocacy skills that her siblings didn't need. We showed her the nuts



and bolts of getting her communication needs met. When she was a youngster, I made sure to interpret my conversation with her swim instructor when I asked for an interpreter. She has seen us advocate for access at the movies, at church, in school, and in many other places. Along the way we have educated people that barriers to communication with deaf and hard of hearing individuals can be overcome.

Further, I wanted Genelle to understand that people may not understand her speech or signs. She would order for herself in McDonald's, and we would discuss the reaction and how to handle it later. She focused on practicing pronunciation for words that would help her become independent. I helped with speech clarity and encouraged her to find other ways to communicate. Reading and writing have always been strengths for her, beginning in preschool when her teacher helped her put to paper a story she made up. We encouraged her to read and write, and literacy has given her access to the words of millions of authors. The electronic dictionary, built right into the MS Word program, was a huge time saver. When she came across a big word, Genelle could click on the definition and read it herself!

SANDERS: My parents highly valued my siblings and me becoming independent and capable of self-advocacy. Since I am deaf, they were very hands-on; they explained behaviors and conversations to me, and answered every question about things I observed. Reading and writing were some of my favorite activities when I was young since they were solitary. I didn't need to work for access or worry about missing information when immersed in my favorite stories. My parents frequently discussed the stories with me, and they asked me questions such as what I would do if I were in a specific character's shoes. My parents used my love of reading as a strategy to help me learn what was appropriate socially.

Growing up, socialization was one area in which my parents and I struggled. I felt awkward—thrust into groups of people with my parents interpreting for me—and I rebelled. I'd turn

down their persistent attempts to interpret, insisting I could handle the interaction myself. I struggled mightily with accessibility for those few years. Once I matured, I realized that my parents' guidance had been beneficial because I was able to compare previous discussions and experiences with my parents with what went on day to day in the workplace. Not everyone understands my signs and speech, but now I'm equipped to cope with that—it is part of functioning independently.

Interpersonal Skills Play Nice in the Sandbox

TIMPERLAKE: We had good friends whose daughter was Genelle's best friend in preschool. As the girls played and fought, we taught them how their actions caused the other to react. Over the years Genelle and I had many conversations about other people's actions and reactions. Some of the nuances of life were not accessible to my daughter—for example, gossip, radio, music—and I took time to explain the things she missed so she would feel less frustrated and left out. We found it was important to learn through experiences in the deaf world where everything was visually accessible. Summer camp, Deaf community events, and interpreted events all helped her to learn to "play nice," and I am proud to hear compliments from people she meets today.

SANDERS: In hindsight, I understand my parents' reasoning for involving me with both the hearing and deaf worlds. They expected me to develop the capability to navigate relationships in both worlds, outside the family nucleus. Frequently after I arrived home from a camp or event, my parents and I would discuss observed behaviors and reactions so I could process what was socially appropriate and what wasn't. Involving me in a variety of events and helping me practice polite and friendly behaviors have helped me develop healthy relationships in both worlds.

Still, growing up as a deaf individual in a mainstream society was difficult. Despite my parents' best intentions, I felt lonely and ostracized by my hearing peers and society as a whole. In order to foster my independence and socialization, my parents

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copied skills than I know what to do with! My skin has grown thicker. I can communicate and socialize with both hearing and deaf people. I've learned to accept my identity as a positive deaf individual in both worlds.

Religion Embracing Something Larger

enrolled me in multiple camps and events during the summer. A few were geared towards hearing children and a few for deaf and hard of hearing children. Even though I was socializing with a variety of children from both worlds, I very distinctly remember the sobering feeling of not fitting in. I participated in so many events! I was constantly moving from one to another with rarely enough time to become close with a crowd of friends. As a result, there was a lot of personal angst and anger directed at my parents. It wasn't that I didn't want to go to another camp or event. I longed for a consistent group of familiar faces.

Emotional Development Developing Stable Emotions and Perspective

TIMPERLAKE: Genelle wasn't always happy, and that did threaten her health for a while. Those times it was even more important for us to let her know that her lack of hearing didn't make her less important or less loved.

We wanted Genelle to see her deafness as a reason to be proud. I learned from deaf friends that as a deaf person she has a birthright to be a member of a strong cultural group, with a complex, unique language and a rich history. Learning to see that as an asset wasn't automatic in our mostly hearing family. We, as parents, had to point out the positives—that we have richer lives because someone in our family is deaf and two languages are better than just one. Our expectation—and goal—from the beginning was that Genelle would be a happy person. As we learned more about Deaf culture, we saw that we wanted her to be a happy deaf person.

SANDERS: Emotional development was a sensitive subject for my parents and me. Growing up deaf and female made me the target of several bullies. There was a period of time when I was angry at the world and especially at my parents. Lots of communication, resentment on my part, and therapy sessions helped us when I was going through adolescence. I was lucky to have a few great friends who tried their best to understand and who included me when I needed it the most. My parents constantly encouraged me to socialize with those friends and made an effort to ask about them and what we were up to.

Looking back, even though I didn't appreciate their effort at the time, I appreciate it now. I was not the easiest human being to be around, but my parents stuck with me. They refused to allow me to withdraw from society and were constantly moving to help me find outlets for my resentment. Today, I have more

TIMPERLAKE: Our wish for our children was that they would each develop a personal relationship with God to inform and sustain them through life. We involved Genelle in religious activities with our family, sometimes interpreted and sometimes with discussion afterward. We answered her questions and made sure she had reading materials about our religion and about the religion of others.

SANDERS: I have faith in God, believe in heaven, and believe in treating others as I would like to be treated. I've always been interested in learning more about the different forms of religion. Understanding various religions and learning more about different beliefs helps me understand individuals better. I can compare and contrast part of their background with my own. My parents were always supportive of my curiosity towards other religions and even interpreted our neighbor's Bar Mitzvah for me so I could access the ceremony. Their support broadened my perspective to understand that one mold does not fit all. I am now open-minded and accepting of differences between people.

In Conclusion Growing is Never Finished

TIMPERLAKE: Raising a deaf child was a great experience for Roger and me. We were always evaluating our expectations based on her actions and our research to make sure that we didn't set the bar too low, leaving her frustrated and not fulfilled, and to make sure the bar wasn't too high, also causing frustration and damaging her self-esteem. We didn't always get it right, but we haven't given up trying, and we hope other parents in this situation can realize their own success through reading our story.

SANDERS: My parents stuck with me and made clear their expectations. Communication and teamwork were vital. They expected me to follow through on goals set and promises made. They celebrated my successes and helped me learn from my failures. Their hands-on involvement combined with their basic expectations created a stable environment for me. My parents' high expectations empowered me to become an independent, healthy adult.

TIMPERLAKE: Our ultimate expectation—empowering Genelle to become a responsible, independent adult—has happily been fulfilled. We rejoice now when we see her successes.