With Strong Roots Children Soar: The Stories of Tyese and Michelle

By Barbara Hunt

Barbara Hunt, MA, is a freelance interpreter in the Washington metropolitan area. She started learning sign language at Gallaudet from teachers Bob Seremeth, Eric Malzkuhn, and Mark Goldfarb. Encouraged by Deacon Willard Shorter and the Shiloh Baptist Church Silent Mission, Hunt started interpreting and working in the Deaf community. She worked at Gallaudet in various positions for 22 years. After earning her master's degree, she taught deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington, D.C., and Loudoun County, Virginia. She developed the ASL component of the foreign language curriculum for D.C. public schools and taught the only ASL classes in D.C.'s school system for seven years. She is one of the founding members of the D.C. chapter of the National Alliance of Black Interpreters, the proud parent of two daughters, and "Nana" to two grandchildren. Hunt welcomes questions and comments about this article at *hunt1313@hotmail.com*.

> *"Understanding parents' perceptions … is useful in planning for rehabilitation approaches and educational opportunities."* (Matt, 2014)

One daughter has won a huge number of competitions with "Miss" in their titles, including Miss Deaf America, and is now completing her doctorate. Another daughter established Onyx, the first national black deaf theater company in New York City, and is an entrepreneur, teacher, director, producer, and actress who appeared in the acclaimed TV show "Girlfriends."

Tyese Wright and Michelle Banks have very different lives; however, both women are independent, confident, and successful, and both were identified as deaf by the age of 18 months. Perhaps their success is partly a result of their upbringing. Both had parents who learned sign language and who became intimately involved in their education. In fact, both had parents who put their own lives on the line for their children.

Linda and William Wright and Bernadette and James Banks wanted their children immersed in the best programs possible. Both sets of parents sent their daughters to the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center—first to Kendall Demonstration Elementary School and then to the Model Secondary School for the Deaf—on the campus of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. Tyese and Michelle were students there when I met them. It was during the 1980s and 1990s, when I was an instructional aide and fledgling interpreter. Since that time, I have watched Tyese and Michelle grow up, graduate, and lead their adult lives. We have maintained contact as I pursue my new career as a freelance interpreter.

Photos courtesy of William Wright and Michelle Banks

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Above: Tyese Wright and Michelle Banks outside KDES in 2017.

Susan Matt in her 2014 article about caregivers' perceptions of disabilities noted:

> *Understanding parents' perceptions of their children's disabilities and their understanding of their children's potential for education and future independence is useful in planning for rehabilitation approaches and educational opportunities.*

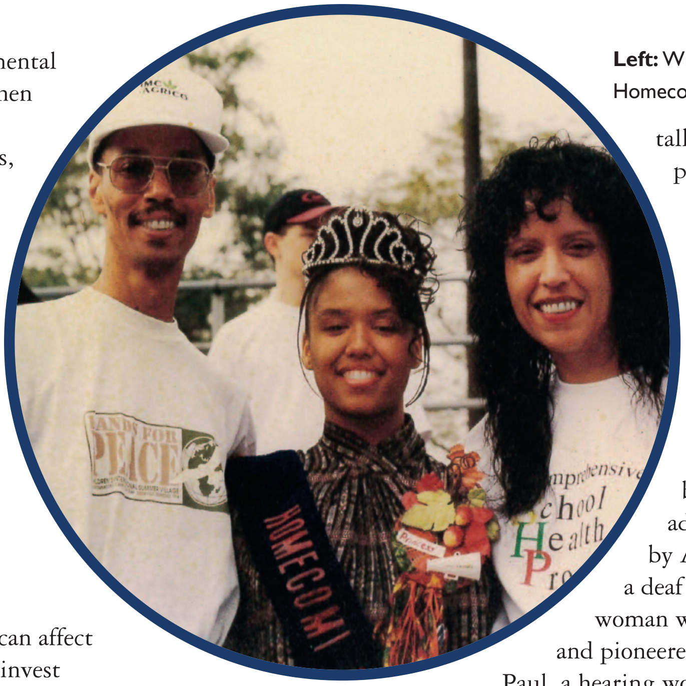
Although Matt's research focused on Asian mothers in Ontario, Canada, her findings have implications for those who raise deaf and hard of hearing children in the United States, and perhaps the findings shed light on why the child-raising strategies of the Wright and Banks families proved so successful.

Neither family had a history of deafness. Neither knew anything about raising a child who is deaf or hard of hearing; both families had a lot to learn, and they began learning it quickly. While each family had a strong religious foundation, their beliefs did not assert that the causes of disabilities included witchcraft, the 'evil eye,' family or ancestral curse, bad deeds, or divine punishment (Matt, 2014). Both families regarded their children's deafness without rancor. Tyese's father remembers that his son Deamond, 5 years older than Tyese and in a Christian school, told his parents, "God gives special children to special parents."

These families accepted their children as blessings. In fact, Linda and William had originally been warned that Tyese's deafness could be the result of a number of debilitating diseases, and when they learned it was not, they "rejoiced that she just couldn't hear" (personal conversation, William Wright, January 15, 2017). They turned their attention to helping Tyese develop language, attaching printed names to everything in the house so that she could see the English words for every piece of furniture and object in her surroundings. Intuitively, they realized the importance of family communication and the whole family—parents, grandparents, and Deamond—signed up and attended classes to learn American Sign Language (ASL).

Bernadette and James Banks underwent some of the same experiences. They had been especially concerned about their daughter's health as Michelle's deafness was the result of an early childhood bout with meningitis, a disease that so often leads to mental challenges and even death. When they realized that the only consequence would be deafness, they felt relief. Like the Wright family, the Banks family, grandparents included, began taking classes in ASL. Like the Wright family, they also considered immersion in language—taken for granted by hearing parents of hearing children but sometimes misunderstood by hearing parents of deaf children—to be paramount.

Matt (2014) noted that the cultural and ethnic traditions can affect whether the parents decide to invest resources towards education and training. If expectations are low, parents can't envision a future in which their child is independent and productive, and they can be influenced to ignore or neglect their child's needs. The adverse effects on their child can include low self-esteem, limited employment opportunities, and isolation. Both the Wright and the Banks families eschewed any traditions in American culture that would allow them to lower expectations for their children. High expectations and emphasis on learning, not necessarily talking, were the foundation of both parents' educational decisions.



Left: Wright with her parents at MSSD's 1996 Homecoming.

Tyese's teachers knew that for her parents, Tyese did not have failure as an option—nothing less than A's and B's was expected on her report card.

Michelle's mother tried an oral program and Cued Speech but realized neither would work for Michelle. The Banks family became involved with a local advocacy group, Deafpride, founded by Ann Wilson, a hearing parent with a deaf son; Barbara Kannapell, a deaf woman who taught at Gallaudet University and pioneered work in Deaf culture; and Eileen Paul, a hearing woman who worked to educate the community about ASL and Deaf culture (personal conversation, Ann Wilson, January 15, 2017). Through Deafpride, they met successful adults who were deaf—working people, many of them professionals, who had families and owned their own homes. This exposure helped Michelle's parents realize that their daughter's life was rich in possibilities.

Both families visited the school regularly, not just for scheduled meetings but to be around other parents, school staff, and their daughter's friends and to interact as a community. Michelle's mother started attending Shiloh Baptist Church, which had a deaf ministry dating back to 1917. There, Michelle was around many of the deaf adults she met at Deafpride, but now deaf adults and deaf child interacted in a place of worship.

Faced with the opportunity to enroll Tyese in a mainstream program, the Wrights turned it down. Their decision was based on the belief that Tyese needed to get her education from deaf people and the Deaf community. She would learn everything she needed to know about "the hearing world" from interacting with her family and in her home community.

The validity of the Banks's decision, arrived at through their own investigation and intuition, is confirmed by research. In their

Helpful Links

FOR FAMILIES OF DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING CHILDREN AND THE PROFESSIONALS WHO WORK WITH THEM

- American Society for Deaf Children—*www.deafchildren.org*
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association—*www.asha.org*
- Deaf Counseling Advocacy and Referral Agency—*www.dcara.org*
- Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center—*http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu*
- Hands & Voices—*www.handsandvoices.org*
- National Association of the Deaf—*www.nad.org*
- National Science Foundation's Science of Learning Center on Visual Language and Visual Learning (VL2), Gallaudet University—*http://vl2.gallaudet.edu*

article on mainstreaming deaf students, Doyle and Dye (2002) pointed out that when deaf students have relationships with peers and adults who also have a hearing loss, the result is a healthy self-concept and sense of cultural identity. Sass-Lehrer's (2014) extensive report on the early lives of deaf and hard of hearing children affirms that families should seek support and guidance from deaf individuals who can serve as mentors, advisors, professionals, and parents to establish a foundation in language acquisition.

So critical is the exposure and connection of deaf and hard of hearing children to adults with hearing loss that the National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management (NCHAM) at Utah State University established the Deaf/Hard of Hearing Adult Involvement Learning Community (*www.infanthearing.org/dhhadultinvolvement*).

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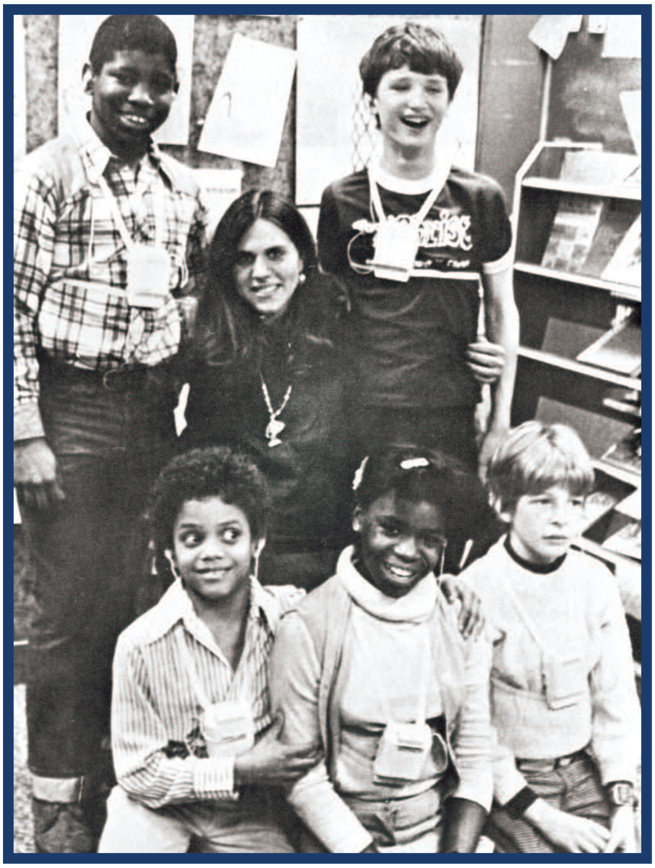
Today technology has made it possible for parents to access resources much more easily than in the early days when the Banks and Wright families investigated what it meant to be the parents of a deaf child. With a few taps at the keyboard, parents can link with organizations such as the American Society for Deaf Children, their state chapter of the National Association of the Deaf, or the Deaf Counseling Advocacy and Referral Agency. However, Tyese and Michelle's parents agree that the best advice they can give to other families of deaf and hard of hearing children is to be actively involved in their child's lives, to learn ASL if that is the most comfortable way for the child to communicate, to connect with the Deaf community, and to set high expectations.

Their advice works. I am a witness.



Above: Banks (front row, center) with her KDES class in 1979.

References

Doyle, M., & Dye, L. (2002, January). Classroom tips for working with deaf and hard-of-hearing students. *Mainstreaming the student who is deaf or hard of hearing: A guide for professionals, teachers, and parents* (pp. 15-20). Boulder, CO: Hands & Voices. Retrieved from *http://www.handsandvoices.org/pdf/mainst_cal.pdf*

Matt, S. B. (2014). Perceptions of disability among caregivers of children with disabilities in Nicaragua: Implications for future opportunities in health care. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 4*(4). doi: *http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v34i4.3863*

Sass-Lehrer, M. (2014). *Early beginnings for children who are deaf and hard of hearing: Guidelines for effective services.* Washington, DC: Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, Gallaudet University.

Resource

Setting Language in Motion: Family Supports and Early Intervention for Babies Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, a web-based resource from Gallaudet University's Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center and the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program of Boston Children's Hospital. Information available at *http://www.gallaudet.edu/clerc-center-sites/setting-language-in-motion.html.*