

LaShawna Sims,

BBA, the daughter of a retired Navy SEAL, wife of a technical sergeant in the Air Force, and mother of two sons, has discovered how to navigate life—and get services for both of her sons—within the structure of the American military. Her older son, Karl, 9, was born deaf, and her younger son, Logan, 7, was born deaf and is autistic. Sims plans to enter a deaf education master’s program at Texas Woman’s University in the fall of 2020. She is the 2019 Armed Forces Insurance Nellis Air Force Base Spouse of the Year, an award she earned in recognition of her work in giving back to the military community. She is also the bilingual southern Nevada regional guide for Guide By Your Side, a program of Hands & Voices. Sims welcomes questions and comments about this article at lashawnasims@ymail.com.

In the U.S. Military: Gleaning Support for Our Deaf Sons

By LaShawna Sims

Our oldest son ran to us at the end of the movie. He had just watched it with his classmates during our time together at an after-school event night. Enthusiastic as always, he reported that “the movie was cool after they turned on the captions.” The statement reflected so much about our son—his passion, his acceptance of his deafness, and his comfort and connection with his peers who, in this case, were all hearing. It all felt so natural, and in some ways it was. However, like the captions on the movie screen—which were only provided after his dad talked with a teacher—our son’s comfort with himself and connection with his peers did not just happen. In fact, they involved considerable behind-the-scenes work.

As a wife and mom in a military family, I’ve found that this work is different from the work of those parents of deaf and hard of hearing children whose families are not serving in the military. For us, being in the military has required periodic moving—once in the middle of the school year—and each move required a new set of contacts, schools, teachers, and services. Still, in general we have received accommodations for our sons and support for my husband and me.

Perhaps I knew better than other wives what to expect since I grew up in a military family. I was born in San Diego, Calif., and grew up in El Paso, Tex., where I felt lucky to be able to stay in one place with my mom and her family while my dad, a Navy SEAL, completed assignments around the world. When I was young, I told myself I would never marry a military man, but after I met the man who would become my husband and he proposed to me on a Florida beach, I knew the military would become my life.

Photos courtesy of LaShawna Sims



Above, clockwise:
K2 and Logan ... best friends; K2 is excelling in Taekwondo; Logan loves to climb—everything; a loving and proud family.



After we married, my husband was assigned almost immediately to Afghanistan. When he returned to his duty station in Little Rock, Ark., we decided to start our family. I was pregnant almost immediately. Our son, named Karl after his dad and whom we call Karl II or “K2,” made his appearance that November. Like all newborns in Arkansas, K2 was tested for hearing loss. He was given the Otoacoustic Emissions (OAE). No problem. He passed. That December, we traveled across several states and settled in Arizona, where we had been re-assigned. There, we noticed that K2 talked, babbled really, less than before, and that he was not responding to sound. Curious and concerned, we

entered his bedroom one day when he had his back to us. We called his name and clapped our hands. He didn’t respond. When he finally turned around, he was startled to see us. He hadn’t known we were there.

We took K2 to be re-tested and the OAE was re-administered. Again, he passed. That is when the audiologist asked us if we knew about auditory neuropathy. We did not. Neither my husband nor I had any family member who had any kind of hearing loss. The term was strange to us. The audiologist explained that auditory neuropathy is a condition in which the outer hair cells within the cochlea are present and functional, but sound is not reliably transmitted to the auditory nerve and

the brain. Auditory neuropathy does not show up on the OAE, she said, and she suspected that this is what our son had. To know for sure, he would have to have another test—the auditory brainstem response (ABR)—for which he would need to be sedated. K2 was 9 months old, too young, I felt, to undergo unnecessary anesthesia. While I accepted the possibility of his being deaf, I still had some doubts.

While I felt I was entering uncharted territory, deafness did not seem like a tragedy. I had known two deaf boys—friends of my brother—growing up. They had been in our home, and I had learned fingerspelling to talk with them. Already we were relying primarily on vision to communicate,



and now we re-doubled our efforts. We started learning American Sign Language (ASL). We got *ASL for Dummies* and used signing in our home. At 9 months old, K2 took to ASL like a fish takes to water. One of his first words was “more.” We used the sign at mealtime, and he mastered it immediately. Suddenly everything was “more.” By the time he was 2 years old, he had a sign vocabulary of over 170 words. K2 was communicating away in signs.

In May 2012, Logan was born. I actually prayed that he would have a hearing loss like his brother so that the boys would have each other for support that we, as hearing parents, might not be able to provide. Like K2, Logan passed the OAE, but the automated auditory brainstem response, a test similar to the ABR, showed he had hearing loss. When the nurse told me the news, she seemed apologetic. Perhaps a second test was called for, she

said; perhaps Logan just had fluid in his ears. She was surprised when I smiled and shook my head. By this time, we were an ASL home. Logan would fit right in.

About three months later K2 finally had an ABR, and profound hearing loss was confirmed. Things moved quickly after that. Early intervention services intensified. K2 and Logan were fitted with hearing aids, and when they did not help, we decided to give our sons access to sound through cochlear implants. Cochlear implants never changed our decision about ASL, however. We would remain a signing family.

Our car became a second home to us.

Traveling was constant—school, programs, therapies, and doctor’s appointments. I can recall the rare days of no therapies or appointments. I would sit at home feeling anxious, thinking I was missing some appointment somewhere for one of the boys. Logan’s surgery was without problems, but K2 developed an orange-sized lump on the left side of his head under which the implant lay. No infection was detected, but after three months of non-invasive approaches the lump did not disappear. We decided to move forward with a revision surgery. About a year and a half later, new problems developed around the incision of his left ear. In 2016, the implant was removed. We made plans to re-implant as soon as his body healed.

At the same time, Logan was diagnosed with autism. His speech therapist had suggested additional testing, but though I liked and respected the therapist, I’d postponed the testing.

Sure, Logan was less social than his brother, and, yes, he had tantrums, even tantrums that lasted 30 minutes or more, but perhaps this was just because of the frustration of trying to communicate with hearing people ... at least that is what I told myself. The therapist was wonderful. She didn’t pester me but when Logan was 2.5 years old, she told me he had stopped looking at her. That’s when I knew that, indeed, something else might be going on. The conversation in which I learned that Logan had autism was different from the conversation I’d had earlier when I learned my sons were deaf. My hearing seemed to tunnel in on the words “moderately autistic.” I kept watching the professional who was talking but I heard nothing else. In the midst of all of this, my husband received orders to his next duty station. We would move again. This time to Las Vegas.



One advantage of living in the military is the way families reach out to help each other. When I learned we were moving again, all I had to do was get on Facebook and search for groups that addressed the special needs children in our upcoming Las Vegas duty station. Groups like these connect newcomers to families already on site who can offer advice on how to set up services. I connected with other parents and was able to get a wealth of information. The



move progressed smoothly, and the online contacts I made enabled a relatively easy transition to the Las Vegas classroom and medical services. K2 had surgery to re-implant the cochlear implant in his left ear, and services for both boys resumed. Our lives were so full that I didn't even know how I felt about Logan's autism until I began training as a parent guide for Hands & Voices' Guide By Your Side program in Nevada. Hands & Voices is a parent-driven, nonprofit organization dedicated to providing support to families with children who are deaf or hard of hearing, with chapters throughout the United States and even throughout the world. As part of the training, parents tell their story, and I was finally telling mine. When I got to the part about Logan's diagnosis of autism, I shocked myself as I burst into tears and sobbed. After that—my

feelings recognized perhaps for the first time—I moved on again.

It was 2017, and we were living in Las Vegas. Hands & Voices Headquarters, hoping to bring its work into the military, was in the midst of creating the Hands & Voices Military Project. The goal of the Military Project is to bring awareness to the unique lifestyle and needs of military families with deaf and hard of hearing children across the nation. It was that year that I joined the leadership team as a project leader. I love Hands & Voices. The organization supports parents regardless of their choice of communication with their deaf and hard of hearing children. The organization offers a safe place to explore options, get emotional support, and learn from one another. Hands & Voices believes: "What works for your child is what makes the choice right."

Today, both of my boys are doing well. K2 has moved into a mainstream setting with an interpreter, and his teachers are open to our insistence on accommodations and sensitive to his needs. He participates as an anchor for the school morning news and excels in his studies. He has picked up Taekwondo, moved quickly through its ranks, and was recently promoted to high orange belt. He was also invited to be a part of the Competition and Demo team for his Taekwondo school. K2 is bright, ambitious, and kind. He told me he wanted to run for his school's student council, and I said, "Go for it." He did and won the election. Now he serves as the student council representative for his third grade class. We've always told K2 he has to ask when he needs assistance or doesn't understand. We are so pleased that he has the self-confidence to do this. He is great at self-advocacy. Sometimes he comes home and announces that he is sick of talking and we should "just sign." This is fine with us. We are raising a bilingual boy!

Logan is excelling in a special class for

children with autism. His diagnosis enabled new therapies, and he no longer has extended tantrums. The teacher uses different strategies and progress is slower, and as parents we are involved in his schooling and therapies to help him continue to succeed. Logan is a sweet and loving boy. He continues to astound us in overcoming obstacles he faces. He likes watching rockets launch and climbing on, up, and over things.



I don't know if it is the military culture that has inspired our drive and success in educating our boys. I do know that the support of other military families has been critical, and the educators and therapists have been open and responsive. As it continues to grow, the Hands & Voices Military Project will provide even more awareness and support to us and to military families like ours.

We are so proud of our sons and optimistic about their future. We can only hope that the accommodations and understanding our boys are receiving will allow them to reach their full development.