

Chelsea Hull, MA, BEI, an active duty spouse, is co-founder of the Hands & Voices Military Project. She is Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI)-certified for interpreting, as well as ASTra (Hands & Voices Advocacy, Support, and Training™) trained and certified. For 25 years, she has helped teach deaf and hard of hearing children, working as a teacher of the deaf, an American Sign Language interpreter, and an educational advocate. Hull's mother identified as deaf and inspired Hull's career in deaf education.

Connely Leis is an active duty Air Force spouse and a mother of three children. Her eldest, 8-year-old Tenley, is deaf; 7-year-old Cohen and 4-year-old Palmer are hearing. Their family is currently stationed in Baltimore, Maryland.

The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at chelseasbusyhands@gmail.com and connelyleis@gmail.com, respectively. If you are a military family seeking Individualized Education Program support, you can contact the ASTra program at www.handsandvoices.org/astra/index.html.

Choosing a School for the Deaf

When a Language-Rich Environment is the LRE

By Chelsea Hull and Connely Leis

“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, Austrian philosopher

All parents of deaf or hard of hearing children face challenges as they strive to provide an environment rich in language for their child. For parents on active duty in the military, however, perhaps this challenge is most acute. Faced with decisions about their child's medical or educational needs, military families must act despite geographic separations, deployment requirements, and frequent moves. These families—required to enroll in the Exceptional Family Member Program—must also learn how to re-establish the child's medical and educational contacts each time they are reassigned and, on top of all this, there is still the Individualized Education Program (IEP) to be completed!

Hands & Voices, the parent advocacy and support organization, has a Military Project that offers information and support to families in the military. The Military Project connects parents—who move an average of every two to three years—with each other to find answers to questions related to insurance, audiology services, sign language support, and educational programs. It also connects families to the Hands & Voices Advocacy, Support, and Training program, which equips parents with the knowledge and confidence they need to work through their child's IEP.

Photos courtesy of Chelsea Hull and Connely Leis



Above: Hull's journey of becoming a military wife and raising two children with autism, in addition to her upbringing as a CODA [child of a deaf adult], has inspired her to support military families within the Hands & Voices network.



Above right: The Leis family checks out a carnival hosted by ASD (2018). **Right:** Tenley's first day of preschool at age 2 (2017).



Chelsea Hull, cofounder of the Military Project, educational advocate, and one of the co-authors of this article, frequently discusses what the law calls “the least restrictive environment” (LRE) with parents. The LRE translates to where and how a child receives their education. Does the child belong in a public school classroom with hearing students? With an interpreter? With a special education teacher? In a special program? In a school for the deaf? When this difficult topic comes up, Hull tells parents to value conversations with other parents as much as conversations with professionals. Further, and perhaps most importantly, she advises parents to think of LRE not only as the least restrictive environment but also as the language-rich environment.

For one military family, the search for a language-rich environment was an

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enlightening journey that ended when their child entered preschool in a school for deaf students. After working with an audiology team that recommended hearing aid trials and a cochlear implant, the family made the decision to allow their daughter to continue her education in American Sign Language (ASL). They requested and received a special reassignment from the military, moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, and sent their daughter to the Arkansas School for the Deaf.

Below is their story.

Tenley's Story **As Told by Connely Leis**

I credit our daughter's first service provider, Meg Mulone, with helping us to provide Tenley with the best support available. Tenley wore hearing aids and had a cochlear implant. The implant was not successful,



Left: Tenley (age 5), her siblings Cohen (age 3) and Palmer (age 1), and their parents (Connely and Ben) in 2021 on the Little Rock Air Force Base in front of a C-130 plane. **Right:** Tenley (left) poses for a photo with her friend, Liz (from MSD), at their dance recital in 2024.

however, and we did not have a good experience with her therapy services. We were told not to use sign language, to only use speech. However, Meg, who helped us with early intervention services and Tenley's Individualized Family Service Plan, explained that we did not have to follow what is often referred to as "the medical model" exactly. She showed us the research about language acquisition, and we learned that if children are not effortlessly immersed in some language in their early years, they may never learn any language well at all. Most importantly, Meg introduced us to culturally Deaf people and a flourishing Deaf community. I don't know what we would have done without Meg; as we say, the first deaf person we ever met was our own daughter.

We wanted the absolute best education for Tenley. Knowing that the statistics about deaf children born into hearing families are pretty devastating, our goal was not to become one of those statistics. We quickly decided that an interpreter in a school setting was not the route we wanted to take. Tenley didn't even have language to begin with, so how would she understand an interpreter? She needed to be surrounded by language, specifically the visual language of American Sign Language (ASL), and she needed to sign with ASL role models. That was our main goal.

We also wanted her to feel comfortable socially. The thought of her being the only deaf child in a school with only one

language she effortlessly understood. Tenley is now 8 years old, and we are certain that advocating for her to attend a school for the deaf is one of the wisest decisions we made for our daughter.

At the Arkansas School for the Deaf (ASD), Tenley had the best preschool teacher! Lynn Brooks had taught at ASD for more than 40 years, and we felt that she became an integral part of our family. Lynn hosted events for the Deaf community, invited us, and, like our early intervention teacher, gave us the encouragement we needed. When we talked with her and saw how Tenley was developing, we knew everything would be okay. We were astounded at how quickly Tenley's signs caught up with those of her Deaf peers who came from signing families.

We knew, of course, that as Tenley's parents, we needed to learn ASL, too. We also knew that our family needed to learn it. As of today, we've taken numerous sign language classes, some of them joined by extended family and friends. While Tenley was at ASD, we were provided with many supports, including sign language classes, opportunities to meet Deaf adults, attend Deaf homecoming games, and even join in on school field trips. The experiences were wonderful and enlightening. We sometimes felt awkward and out of place at some of



Left: Tenley enjoys playing soccer. In 2022, she played for a city recreation league, using an interpreter to communicate with the team.

the events because most of the attendees were deaf or hard of hearing, and almost everyone except us was skilled in ASL. Still, we realized that this is how you grow, and adjusting to the Deaf bilingual and bicultural community became easier the more we participated. Our goal is for Tenley to feel included, comfortable, and safe in her own home.

One special support I received from ASD was hands-on help with my signing. I loved this. If I didn't understand what my daughter was saying, I videoed her with my phone, sent the video quickly to ASD, and they sent me back a translation. I



often joke that her teachers were probably sick of me because I had so many questions about ASL, but they knew I cared about proper language development, and they were always supportive.

Tenley is now a confident, strong-willed, and brave child. I love—and find it amazing—to pick her up from school and see her walking out with her classmates, signing with everyone, joking, laughing, and teasing. I enjoy going to performances, events, and games at her school. I love to have her deaf friends come over and see how they play, signing

nonstop. Tenley will sign with people even if she knows they don't understand her. However, she will code-switch to easily understood gestures to get her point across. She makes hearing friends at parks and around the neighborhood. She plays on multiple hearing sports teams with an interpreter, and her teammates find the addition of a Deaf player, her sign language, and her interpreter fascinating if not a little intimidating. Tenley also enjoys playing with babies and toddlers; I delight in watching her sign to them. I treasure watching her grow, discover the world, and learn to advocate for herself.

I am fortunate to have received support from the Hands & Voices Military Project. It is difficult that, as a military family, we must move every three to four years. The military has a special plan for families like ours: the Exceptional Family Member Program. It is a lengthy and tedious process to be enrolled in the program; however, once enrolled, it allowed us to meet Tenley's educational and medical needs. Now she is at

the Maryland School for the Deaf (MSD), and we are thankful for the large Deaf community here.

Tenley orders drinks at the "signing Starbucks," goes to deaf-owned restaurants, and has deaf and hard of hearing friends who live nearby.

There are times when I'm sure Tenley still feels left out. She still needs me to interpret for her every now and then. She is aware of how she is different from hearing people. However, I can say she is confident in her identity as a Deaf child.

"Knowing that the statistics about deaf children born into hearing families are pretty devastating, our goal was not to become one of those statistics."

- Connely Leis, Tenley's mother

I don't think any of this would have been possible without putting her in two of our nation's schools for the deaf.

Both ASD and MSD have provided an environment specially designed for her. Both schools had LREs—language-rich environments—that weren't even the slightest bit restrictive. With our support and the support of her teachers and friends, Tenley continues to flourish socially and educationally.

Learn more about the Hands & Voices Military Project, which provides specialized assistance to active duty and retired military families, at www.handsandvoices.org/resources/military. Military members can also join the private group on Facebook.

