

Submitted by Djenne-amal Morris

Ayisha....

Malik is our second of 3 children, being flanked on either side by his 2 sisters. He was born with a genetic condition called CHARGE Syndrome, in which he is profoundly deaf, legally blind and has other health challenges. I suspected that Malik had a hearing loss when he failed to startle or respond to voices...and we're a pretty loud family. He was officially diagnosed with bilateral profound sensorineural hearing loss, DEAF, at 1-year of age.

Since we were already a part of the early intervention program in Boston, we were told that we would be sent someone to teach us how to sign. That someone, came in the form of a feisty, Deaf woman named Ayisha who showed up at our house one night. I opened the door and she began signing furiously at me with a huge grin on her face. I looked behind this beautiful woman, convinced that the interpreter was right behind her. NOT! I managed to understand her sign, "Oh, well, we don't need an interpreter anyway!" Fortunate for me, I learned basic sign and worked with Deaf adults in college, so I thought I could eek my way through. Little did I know, that our relationship with Ayisha would turn into a lifelong friendship and a gateway into a whole new world and culture. She came weekly for almost 3 years to teach our family ASL (the mysterious interpreter never materialized). She was very patient with our fumbling and taught me, in particular, never to be ashamed of my signing...to just try and welcome correction. We learned that this wasn't just a language through which to communicate with our son, but signing and Deaf culture was a part of life. Ayisha was our mentor and friend. No question was too much or silly. Her visits became a refreshing cool drink on a hot summer's day. It became who we were, not just how we communicated. We saw a successful Deaf woman with the same pride, joys, fears and struggles as we had and were able to share them openly. Who knew one could drive and sign simultaneously?

Having access to a Deaf mentor early in Malik's life relieved us of the fear of how he was going to communicate with the world. It showed our girls the rich diversity of the world we live in and gave them another way to express themselves and communicate. My youngest daughter's first words were in ASL and we rejoiced. She and her brother argued regularly in sign over food and toys. Ayisha and I taught a group of inner city kids ASL and Deaf culture in an after-school enrichment program. How beautiful it was to see those children be as mesmerized by Ayisha's life as I was 3 years prior. We shared tears with their parents as they performed the song, "Hold On, You Can Make It" at the end of year celebration.