

RACHEL COLEMAN

When she learned the disturbing news that her daughter, Leah, was deaf, Rachel Coleman admits, “I felt cheated.” She says she also questioned life with a “*why this?*” attitude. Yet in spite of her understandable first response, it’s what happened next that makes Rachel Coleman this month’s Victorious Woman honoree.

As the middle child in a family of nine siblings, a teenage Rachel muddled through the confusion that marked those turbulent years. Struggling with depression, she used music, playing the guitar and writing songs to express her feelings during a time when verbal communication seemed awkward and difficult.

When she went to college, Rachel chose nursing as a career path. She took the first few steps, but then felt driven to return to the music that enabled her to find her true voice. So, she gathered together a few musicians and formed a band. They started playing small gigs, looking for stardom.

During that uncertain time, the diminutive young woman met tall, lanky Aaron, an attractive and easy-going guy who was completing a degree in Parks, Recreation and Tourism. Rachel and Aaron were crazy in love. With the intense energy of soul mates, they knew they would be together *no matter what*.

The couple married and, after Leah’s birth in 1996, Rachel became a stay-at-home mom. Music shifted to a part-time, satisfying diversion into which her infant daughter easily blended. In fact, it amazed Rachel how comfortably she could bring Leah to practices because the baby slept through anything.

Then Rachel and Aaron found out why Leah was so accommodating during music time: the beautiful toddler was deaf. The news seemed to smack Rachel in the face. Angry and upset, Rachel gave up music, deciding it was “a waste of time to spend that much time on something that my child [couldn’t] hear.” In truth, Rachel didn’t want to play music or do anything else. She just wanted to stay in bed and pull the covers over her head...for the rest of her life.

As Rachel and Aaron struggled to find a way to deal with the news, Rachel noticed her daughter seemed confused and concerned by her parents’ sadness. Suddenly Rachel realized that “hearing impaired” was something different for them, but *nothing was different for Leah*. She couldn’t hear before and a confirmed medical diagnosis made no difference to Leah at all. *Her* life was exactly the same. Rachel’s realization was life-altering because it changed everything for her and her family forever.

Almost immediately, the family focus became communication – ironically, *it was the one thing Rachel always found personally difficult*. However, Rachel wanted Leah to grow up interacting with others in a healthy and meaningful way – and she would do whatever was necessary to help her daughter. Rachel and Aaron quickly concentrated on learning American Sign Language and teaching it to Leah. Rachel’s sister Emilie and spouse, Derek, learned to sign too. They even taught their infant son Alex, who could sign before he could talk.

While Rachel marveled at how fast Alex learned, she also noticed the way other children behaved. She saw how, because they couldn’t communicate with Leah, the classmates awkwardly shied away from her. She saw the hurt in her daughter’s eyes when the other children treated her differently. That’s when the loving mother got an idea. She called the local preschool and offered to teach a class in signing. The teachers were very receptive to her idea and soon she was teaching Leah’s classmates how to sign.

From the very first class, the children’s interaction with Leah changed. As it often happens with any language, the children picked up signing quickly, happily practicing their new skill with Leah. The classes continued and grew.

As Rachel and Aaron became more settled in their life with Leah, they decided they were ready for another child, fully prepared that their second child might also be deaf. In fact, they believed they were ready for any possibility...*until* an ultrasound and blood test confirmed that the baby Rachel was carrying had Spina Bifida, a condition that only occurs in one in every one thousand births. “We were in shock,” Rachel acknowledges.

Making matters worse, her medical staff tried to convince Rachel and Aaron to terminate the pregnancy. As they cited issues around life care and finances, the doctors recommended abortion, telling the couple, “You don’t have to do this.”

For a little while, Rachel reacted by crying, worrying and fretting about the future. Then one day she said, as much to herself as to Aaron, “**Stop**. This is exactly how we felt when we found out Leah was deaf...and look at what we’ve learned. This isn’t the end of our lives...we can figure it out...we can do this together.” And with yet another life-altering decision made, the couple accepted their new baby into their lives...*and miracles began to happen*.

Within days, Rachel was online looking for solutions. She found an experimental treatment could minimize the effects of Spina Bifida. It was costly, would require travel to another state, had a 50% chance of working and certainly had risks associated with it. In spite of the fact that the couple could barely pay the monthly rent on their apartment Rachel remembers, “Something switched inside. I’m going to do that,” she resolved. “I don’t know how, *but I am*.”

As she talked about her decision, word got around and people were generous. Rachel and Aaron accepted donations of money, airfare and lodging and took the risky step forward. The preventative surgery was successful, but precipitated the premature C-Section that brought Baby Lucy into the world. Nine months later, doctors diagnosed Lucy with Cerebral Palsy.

Soon, in addition to the normal care for a newborn, Lucy's condition required a catheter that had to be changed every four hours. At times, life with Lucy was intense and all-consuming.

By now, Rachel no longer asked "why" but focused her thoughts on ways to create a happy life for Aaron, Leah, Lucy and herself. While disabilities require many adjustments that often bear down on a marriage until it breaks, the relationship between Rachel and Aaron deepened. As Rachel laughingly explained, she and Aaron "hold onto each other for dear life. I don't want to do this without him, and he doesn't want to do this without me."

One day Emilie called Rachel with an idea to make a video for children and sell it online. Rachel liked the idea and suggested they make it about signing. The sisters, one living in California and the other in Virginia, developed the idea over the phone. Rachel returned to playing the guitar, writing music and singing songs for the video. Created in 2002, with Emilie as producer and Rachel, Leah and Alex as the "on-camera talent", they marketed *SIGNING TIME: Volume 1* over the internet to the parents of deaf children as well as those looking for tools that encouraged early communication skills.

In spite of money and time issues, they moved forward, changing and adapting as necessary. Aaron only took jobs that would support his special family & time needs. They moved closer to Utah so they could share a duplex with Rachel's family members who helped. They traded in their cars and replaced them with vehicles that would accommodate Lucy's wheelchair.

All the while, Signing Time gained popularity. Rachel and Emilie added Volume II to the Signing Time series...then III, IV and more. As Signing Time grew into a serious creative production, it became the family business; Emilie, Derek and Alex moved across country so they could all be working together and in the same place. Parents and siblings also pitched in with their own special talents.

As the business grew, so did the girls. The irony of her children's lives wasn't lost on Rachel. She remembers thinking at the time, "Leah can do everything but hear, and Lucy is immobile and *all* she can do is hear." Yet she found herself in constant awe at how her daughters taught her more about life and love than she ever imagined possible.

Over time, and something of a miracle for a child with her physical challenges, Lucy began signing too. Later, she also began talking. About the amazing developments, Rachel reasoned, "I think signing helped Lucy develop faster."

These days, as her children grow, Rachel admits the challenges of everyday life are sometimes overwhelming, even without the pressures of business. She's forever grateful to her family and others who are in her life. Without their help she would not be able to care for her family *and* produce Signing Time.

At the same time, like anyone else, she can get down in the dumps, both physically and emotionally. Rachel understands that if she doesn't take care of herself, her helpers will have a greater workload; she doesn't want that to happen. As a result, she's radical about her own self-care, which includes aerobic exercise, yoga, snow skiing and finding private time for herself, all for preventative maintenance. She strongly advises other women to be just as diligent, not only for their own well-being but also for that of their family.

Every woman can discover, learn and grow, even when the opportunities aren't pretty and disguised as difficulties. That's the difference between being a Victim or Surviving Woman (sabotaging STEPPING STONES), and the Advancing Woman who follows her path to victory.

From the beginning, sharing her voice presented courage and complications that few of us can fathom. But Rachel Coleman, the young woman who found communication so prickly, victoriously faced challenge after challenge with vision and persistence...*and continues doing it*. Along with Aaron, Lucy, Leah, Emilie, Alex and the whole SIGNING TIME team, millions of hearing-impaired children, their parents, siblings, relatives and friends have richer, more meaningful lives.

The process of victory includes the discovery and growth through which a woman finds her own unique voice. It can be painfully revealing and usually so uncomfortable that many women take a pass. Yet, as Rachel Coleman demonstrates, it is that very *unease* that marks the path to victory and enables a woman to shape life's challenges into personal victories.

Congratulations, Rachel!

*The victory in your heart inspires and honors women
and calls each of us to find our own voice, our own Victorious Woman.*

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