

THE SIMPLE CIRCLE: THE SHAPE OF OUR FUTURE



by Teresa McMohan

I am sitting in a packed auditorium on a warm spring evening. Proud parents are finding their way to a reserved section marked by a large satin ribbon. Anxious fathers pin large corsages on nervous mothers. Teachers are scurrying around taking care of last minute details. Many Deaf adults and students are visiting. I sit by myself and watch their hands flying, so excited to be sharing this important moment with each other. The Superintendent of the Tennessee School for the Deaf approaches the podium and everyone settles down. As he proceeds with his welcome, my eyes fall on a young blonde student sitting on stage and my mind begins to wander.

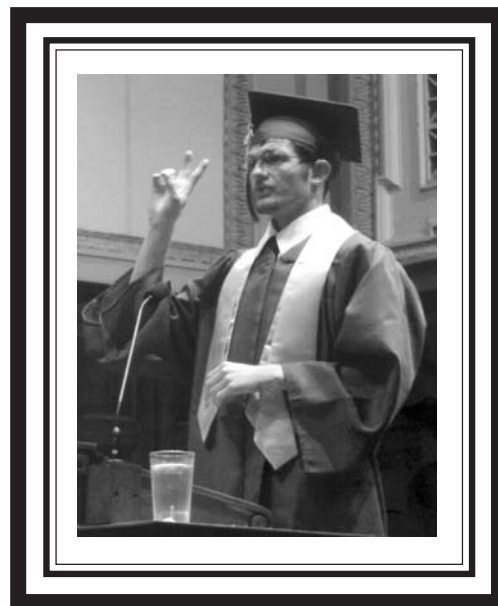
I'm driving down a long gravel road in the mountains of East Tennessee. It's a crisp autumn morning and as I round the corner there is the little wooden house. Smoke is curling from the chimney and there on the porch waiting for me is two year old Nathan and his mom, Ella. Nathan is holding his baby blanket and his mom's hand. As I come up on the porch Nathan begins asking with baby speech and signs, "Miss Teresa, play, play!" Ella greets me warmly and says, "Lord you're not going to believe what this child has learned this week!"

We enter the warm house and sit next to a wood stove that dominates the living room. Ella and I catch each other up on our week, sharing stories of our children's adventures and gradually we get down to the business of our visit. We discuss how Nathan is beginning to change the pitch of his voice, and we want to think of ways to encourage this. I pull out some bubbles from my bag and Ella and I sit on the floor. I blow a bubble and it rises toward the ceiling and I say, "Bubble uuuuuuuup! Nathan claps wildly and tries to catch the next bubble. I wait for several seconds until Nathan requests "uh!" After several more attempts we hear "uuuuuuuh!" with lots of inflection. Ella and I clap, and then she takes over the bubble game as I applaud them both. Quickly our hour passes. The bubbles are left so Nathan and his mom can play this game again. Hugs and kisses are exchanged and I'm walked to the car. The last thing I hear is Ella's voice saying, "See you next week Miss Teresa!" I drive down the road en route to my next family and I think to myself, "This has to be the best job in the world!"



The beginning of an introduction interrupts my thoughts. “And now, Class of 2001, I am proud to introduce your Valedictorian, Nathan Barnes. The young blond student confidently approaches the podium and begins to speak and sign.

“In our world today, we have strong leaders. Tomorrow is today’s young people’s chance to be leaders. It is up to us, then to decide how we will shape the future. The “shape” I see for our future is a simple circle. Like explained in some wedding ceremonies, the wedding band is a circle, a band of gold or silver, precious and unending. It is the never-ending thread that binds us together. However, for our purposes today, I would like for you to mentally envision concentric circles. Our future starts at our innermost core – our family. As we grow, it spreads into a larger community of Deaf people. We are also introduced into the third core, which is our local hometown communities, and lastly, into the entire world community. What we do will affect all of these circles in our lives.



In my family, community is already a strong concept because we share our love for each other. We all have God in our lives. I would like to thank my parents for all of their time and patience to keep my family strong and in touch. My family is very precious to me because they did not reject the Deaf members. I would like to teach sign language to my extended family and get an interpreter for my little hometown church. I will also volunteer to be the next family historian so I can keep the family tree up to date for the next generation. It soon will be my time to become a family elder.

I have lived in two communities growing up. I not only was loved by my family, but the Deaf community also embraced me. I want to become a part of the local deaf organizations, such as the Jr. NAD and the National Association for the Deaf. These two organizations have helped build a bridge between the Deaf community and the larger Hearing community. Without organizations such as the two I have mentioned, telecommunication devices and closed captioning for the Deaf may have been only a dream. I would like to continue to work with both the Deaf and Hearing communities to find ways to make life easier for the next generation. I want to help senior citizens with their dreams for a fulfilled

life. It will be our responsibility to ensure that these treasured souls live out their lives in a comfortable, dignified manner.

The third circle in the image becomes the local community and the state community. I need to be involved with the government and help schools like mine get more updated technology, materials, and methods. I feel we must find ways to attract new, energetic people into the field of educating youth. Many teachers will retire within the next ten years so we need to begin now. We also need to be more aware of our politicians. We need to question our elected officials to make sure they are serving the needs of the many, not the few. We must find ways to instill in people that they “can” do things and make changes. We need to find reasons for people to want to succeed in their lives.

The fourth circle, the world community, in large part depends on the other three concentric circles. We must get into foreign countries to help in humanitarian ways, not send troops. They, too, need a reason to live, a reason to struggle. We need to pen letters to our congressmen to tell how we feel. We need to communicate what really needs to be changed to make the world a better place for all. We need to bring the poverty level of local, state, national and world communities to a level where all can feel a part of a bigger community. We need to help these people to their feet, encourage them to take the first steps to work, and show them that they can dream, too. The best way we can accomplish this is by being a good role model.

In summary, just the way concentric circles appear when drawn out on paper, we are cased within each other. One circle does not do well unless the others are affected too. A pebble dropped in water spreads its waves as the honest work of all communities engulfs and inspires its population. Thank you.”

The crowd bursts into applause. Deaf adults and students raise their hands high above their heads, fingers fluttering (Deaf applause). A father is standing and making the “I Love You” sign towards the stage and mothers are wiping tears. As for myself, I am so deeply proud of the first family that I served in the “new” field of early intervention, some sixteen years ago.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of being a part of a vision developed by Dr. Tom Clark at the SKI-HI Institute in the 1970’s. Dr. Clark knew then as we know now that families who are given support and information can have a profound impact on the development of their young child with a disability and that this knowledge can greatly enhance the relationship with their child.

In my own state of Tennessee, I have watched my program director, Dr. Don Thompson catch that same vision and have seen our early intervention program grow from serving 15 families in 1980 to almost 3,000 families a year across our state.

On a national level through involvement with AAHBEI, I have seen colleagues across the United States further the vision of Dr. Clark by joining with families to assume roles of leadership and advocacy to grow the field of early intervention. They recognize the truth of Nathan Barnes’ statement. “Our future starts at our inner most core – our family.”

I am confident that next week, as I visit another family and am a witness to their love and efforts on behalf of their young child, I will think to myself, "This has to be the best job in the world!"