



GOOSE CREEK

CONSOLIDATED INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Hearing Impaired Student Wins Campus Spelling Bee

Nine-year-old Liam Stokes had to think about the word Romeo for only a few seconds before finger-spelling his way to a first place win in the Ashbel Smith Elementary School Spelling Bee.

Learning to spell lists of words is challenging for anyone, but Liam was born deaf, so participating in a spelling bee was a bit more complicated for him. His mother, deaf education teacher Erin Stokes, and his teacher Rebekah Farrell had to develop “classroom signs” for words on the list that have no sign, and Liam memorized the spelling of the words. They also used pictures to practice, but they are not used for the competition.

During the campus contest, Farrell signed the words without using the letters. Liam finger-spelled each word, letter-by-letter. Laura Cothran, another one of Liam’s teachers, will back Farrell up during the District Spelling Bee to make sure the signs are correct. Although Liam had cochlear implant surgery about three years ago, and his hearing loss is now considered mild to moderate, he hears sounds, but he does not yet understand spoken words.

Even more amazing is that this feisty little competitor had no language at all when he came from China to live with his adoptive parents four years ago.

“We sought out a deaf child because of my career in deaf education,” said Stokes. “My family was open to it, and they knew they needed to learn to communicate with him.”

That’s been no issue, because siblings Aidan, 14; Colin, 12; and their sister Jaci, 11, who joined the family from China as a baby, act just like any other brothers and sisters—roughhousing, squabbling and enjoying family activities, especially sports. Their father Jay, Deer Park’s City Manager, has picked up sign language through an online coaching program provided by Texas School for the Deaf for parents of deaf children.

Although Liam lives in Deer Park, the third grader attends Goose Creek CISD through the Tri-County East Regional Day School Program for the Deaf, which serves 174 deaf and hard of hearing children from Goose Creek CISD and 16 surrounding school districts in three counties. Through the help of his teachers and interpreters, he is steadily improving his communication skills.



(from left) Teacher Rebekah Farrell, Liam Stokes and Erin Stokes, Liam’s mother, work together to prepare for the Goose Creek CISD District Spelling Bee after Liam’s first place win in the Ashbel Smith Elementary competition.

Liam made it through 11 rounds of the spelling bee before he was named the winner, earning the opportunity to participate in the District Spelling Bee February 27. After all, he had practiced his word lists, so he was up for the challenge. He grinned and pulled at his chin as he tried to remember which words had been most difficult for him to learn. Fluctuation was a hard word, as were university and tantrum.

“For tantrum, we had to show him the signs for cry and fit,” said Farrell, who was not surprised by his win but admits they have a great deal of work to do to prepare for the district competition. They’re working on the 7th and 8th grade word lists, but it would be almost impossible to learn every word that might be used in the District Spelling Bee.

No matter how he finishes in the upcoming competition, Liam has already shown his aptitude for learning and is continuing to set his goals high, planning to go to college to be a labor and delivery nurse. He likes to spell, but math is his favorite subject.

When it’s time for the District Spelling Bee, Liam signed that he will be “nervous,” but that he will be “excited” if he wins. Just making it this far is f-a-n-t-a-s-t-i-c!

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