



A SOUND BEGINNING

Lexington Hearing and Speech Center's Special Mission

By Robin Roenker | Photos by Jonathan Palmer

When Cara and Jason Groth of Lexington adopted their then-22-month-old son, Silas, from China, he could hear only minimally, and he did not speak. Born with bilateral microtia, Silas had inner and outer deformities in both ears.

Now 5, Silas is a happy, healthy kindergartener who loves reading and math and playing with his friends at Lexington Hearing & Speech Center, where he's attended school since age 3.

"He talks just as well now as any 5-year-old little boy that you'd ever run into," Jason said. "If you could have seen our child when we brought him home and then see him today, the difference is just amazing."

Of course, the talented team of surgeons at Cedars-Sinai and Stanford University Medical Center in California who, during two procedures over the last 18 months, reconstructed Silas' ear canal and installed prosthetic inner bones to restore normal hearing in his left ear deserve considerable credit for his improvement. (Silas wears a Bone Anchored Hearing Aid, or Baha, to augment

the hearing in his right ear.)

Yet the Groths believe fervently that the services Silas has received at Lexington Hearing & Speech Center (LHSC) have been just as instrumental in his transformation.

"It's hard to put into words how much he changed in working with Ms. Jo [Silas' LHSC preschool teacher] for those two years," said Cara. "When he started with



her at age 3, he was saying only a few words here and there. Through it all, she was such a support to me, and she was such a wonderful, patient, loving teacher to Silas. And this year Ms. Denise has prepared him so well academically to go on next year to public school. He's definitely ready. I can honestly say that the staff at LHSC forever changed our family and our life for the better."

Kindergarten teacher Denise Lewis, working with her class during a reading session, describes the progress LHSC students make as "just amazing."

A New Home

Now in its 52nd year, Lexington Hearing & Speech Center opened in 1960 as the Lexington Deaf Oral School, when a small group of local parents approached founders Edie and Jimmy Frankel with the idea of establishing a center to teach speech skills to their children with hearing impairments.

The idea was novel for its time, and even today Lexington Hearing & Speech is the only program of its kind in Kentucky whose curriculum is founded solely on a listening and spoken language approach. The program intentionally does not teach sign language. “It’s not that we’re anti-sign,” explained Marcey Ansley, LHSC’s executive director. “It’s just that parents deserve a choice, and as an agency we made the decision long ago that our goal was going to be to get kids in our program to talk. Ninety-five percent of children with hearing loss are born to hearing parents. We want these kids to be able to communicate with their families. That’s our core mission.”

Ansley’s own son, now an 11-year-old fifth-grader and straight-A student at Julius Marks Elementary, attended LHSC for preschool and speech and language therapy services, having been born with moderate bilateral hearing loss. While he still wears hearing aids, they don’t hold him back. “He’s a sports nut, and he played basketball all season without his coach even realizing he had hearing aids,” said Ansley, who took the helm at LHSC a year and a half ago. “That tells you just how well he’s doing now. I’m a firm believer in early education and early intervention, and I truly believe that those early services we got here at LHSC are the basis for his success.”

Preschool teacher Jo Ellen Rule helps Kingston Coats, left, and Aiden Johnson build a tower with blocks during class.



Executive director Marcey Ansley, left, and director Kim Smart are committed to LHSC’s mission.

Previously headquartered out of three small homes on North Ashland Avenue, last year LHSC moved to its new facility at 350 Henry Clay Boulevard, in the former Julia R. Ewan Elementary School building.

Funded by an ongoing \$2.35 million “Buy the Building” capital campaign — of which LHSC has raised nearly half — the move has expanded the center’s space ten-fold, allowing it to add several, sizeable new state-of-the-art classrooms, audiology sound booths, and therapy rooms. The center now serves roughly

1,000 clients across all of its programs. When at full capacity in its new building, LHSC hopes to expand its services by roughly 35 percent. Still, it plans to stay true to its family-centered focus and maintain a small student-to-teacher ratio of no more than 6-1 in its therapy classrooms.

“The building space has grown so much, but they didn’t change the vital things about the school that make it so special,” said Kenzie Coats of Nicholasville, whose son, Kingston, 4, has attended preschool and speech therapy services at LHSC for the last two years. “It still has a small, one-on-one kind of feel. I go in, and I know every single person’s name who works there, and they all know my name and Kingston’s name.”

Early Intervention

Inside the freshly painted hallways of LHSC’s new home, bright and cheery bird and insect murals by local artist Jamie Schneider greet the children as they file into their classrooms.

In one hall a large mural of LHSC’s charming bird logo — with the words “a sound beginning” — adopted in advance of their move to the new facility, sets the



tone for the agency's mission and work.

One wing houses LHSC's early learning center, which includes a full-time daycare, or day school, for children up to age 2. Another wing is home to the morning and afternoon preschool program, for children ages 3-5, and the center's full-day kindergarten classroom and new therapeutic preschool classroom for children with autism spectrum disorders. Upstairs, outpatient clients, both children and adults, can receive speech and language therapy, audiology services, and aural rehabilitation.

In fact, the "Lexington" in LHSC is a bit of a misnomer, Ansley said, noting the center currently pulls from a client base representing 66 Kentucky counties — some from as far as Fulton County, in Kentucky's westernmost corner. That's because LHSC works in close partnership with the University of Kentucky's cochlear implant program, providing outpatient audiology and speech therapy services to patients as they begin the cochlear implant preparation process, immediately after their implants — to adjust them appropriately — and years following, for ongoing speech and auditory therapy.

LHSC has long had a "complementary and synergistic partnership with our department," said Dr. Matthew Bush, UK assistant professor of otolaryngology (ENT surgery) who serves on LHSC's board. "Together we are forging a bright future for children throughout our region with hearing loss as we explore novel methods to provide care for every child."

When new babies fail their newborn hearing screenings at the hospital, they are often immediately referred to LHSC for services by UK or by their pediatricians.

"We build lasting bonds with our clients," said Shelby Rutledge, LHSC's speech pathology program director. "I usually start seeing children at about three months of age and my current oldest client is now 10."



Silas Groth, 5, reads aloud during a reading session in his kindergarten class.

While even 10 years ago children typically weren't given cochlear implants until age 2 or 3, now, barring any complications, the goal is to fit newborns for hearing aids by three months and provide them with a cochlear implant by 12 months of age, said Rutledge, who is one of only three therapists in Kentucky with a Listening Spoken Language Specialist (LSLS) Auditory-Verbal Therapist certification. (A LHSC co-worker, Carolyn Karam, is another; the third is in Harlan County.) "Appropriate early intervention is key," Rutledge said.

A Unique Mix

While several teachers in LHSC's early learning center have specialized training in working with children with speech and language delays, the program is open to any child — with or without a hearing or speech challenge. Of the 109 children enrolled in LHSC's early learning center currently, 70 receive services

for speech and/or hearing delays, while 30 are "typically developing" children with normal speech and language skills for their age.

"While we started as a preschool for children who were deaf, we've really grown," Ansley said. "We grew because we wanted to meet the needs of children with hearing loss, but we realized that the core services we're providing — a 'language-enriched' curriculum that focuses on teaching kids how to listen and to talk, and which stresses exposing children to as many words as possible to provide a solid foundation for literacy — are really applicable to any child."

That's why every classroom boasts a unique mix of children — some with cochlear implants, some with hearing aids, some with speech delays, and some "typicals," as the center calls them — who learn and play together seamlessly.

Some students, including two in Megan Brown's preschool classroom for au-

tism spectrum disorders, are nonverbal or can only speak in single words. Others can speak in full sentences. But therapy is tailored to meet every child's abilities, and goals are individualized.

"Kingston went from having five words

to over 750 words in one year," said his mom, Kenzie Coats. "We're definitely over the 2,000-word mark now. The other day, he said, 'Mom, you're best friend to me,' and my heart just melted. It was the first time he was ever able to articulate anything like that."

"Our students come to us sometimes moderately to severely delayed, and then they leave us going in to the next school setting at or above the level of their peers. It's just amazing," said LHSC Kindergarten teacher Denise Lewis, whose own daughter receives speech services at LHSC.

In fact, outside visitors to the school — including UK graduate students who frequently volunteer — often cannot identify which students at the school are hearing-impaired.

"The UK students were leaving the observation one day, and they said, 'the little blond girl, she must be your 'typical' student,'" recalled Jo Ellen Rule, LHSC's lead preschool teacher. "And I said, 'No, she is profoundly deaf.' But they could not tell based on her speech and language. She sounded that good."

Whole-Family Support

Inside LHSC's early learning center, classrooms look like any other typical preschool or kindergarten room, filled with student crafts, art centers, pretend play areas, circle time and snack time, and lots of smiling faces.

But for the roughly 65 percent of LHSC students dealing with a speech or hearing delay, "therapy happens from the moment they step foot in the door," said Rule. "It's incorporated with the academics. I'm listening to their articulation. I'm looking at how they read the words. But if you're a good therapist and a good teacher, they never know you're doing therapy on them. You make it fun, and it feels very natural."

Similarly, for the roughly 900 out-patient clients who come to the center for

Lexington Hearing & Speech Center receives funding through tuition, Medicaid, and private insurances, state funds, United Way, and grants from individual donors and various nonprofits and not-for-profits, including Keeneland, which has contributed \$146,000 to LHSC over the years.

To make a tax-deductible donation to LHSC's capital campaign or to learn more about its services, go to <http://www.lhscopy.org/>.

hour-long speech or auditory therapy services each week, walking into LHSC "never feels like going to the doctor," said Megan Blandford Brown, who works as a speech/language pathologist at the center in addition to leading its new pre-school classroom for autism spectrum disorders. "They'll say, 'Oh, I'm going to Ms. Megan's to play,' when it's their turn for therapy."

The special atmosphere at LHSC benefits all students there, its teachers say.

Said teacher Lewis: "When our students go on to another school setting, they embrace the others that are around them. They're not afraid of differences. As a result, they go on, socially and emotionally, to be leaders in their school environments."

And, for parents, LHSC provides an invaluable sounding board, information source, and support system.

"When I first found out Kingston had a speech delay, I had so many questions," Kenzie Coats said. "I didn't understand what I had done wrong. LHSC really just allowed me to pause and take a breath. They said, 'We're here to help.' And they taught me about articulation and pronunciation and the different sounds he should be making, and how to incorporate that into our everyday lives. It's just amazing how far he's come. As a mom, I can only wish for the moon for Kingston, and so far I've been getting everything I've wished for at LHSC." 🐎

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