

FINDING

THEIR

VOICE

AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MARIA SENTELIK WALKS THE HALLS OF HER SCHOOL, OHIO VALLEY VOICES, SHE STOPS TO HIGH-FIVE A STUDENT WHO JUST CRACKED THE CODE ON THE ELUSIVE “KUH” SOUND. These vocal victories are common occurrences—and cause for celebration.

That’s because the students at Ohio Valley Voices were either born profoundly deaf or hearing impaired. Mastering a new sound deserves hugs, hoots and hollers, according to Maria and her staff.

Ohio Valley Voices doesn’t function like a normal school. Students, all of whom either have hearing aids or cochlear implants, get individual attention and instruction (classes are no larger than seven) to develop the tools they need to communicate. This hidden gem has put itself on the map thanks to the Moog method—a successful curriculum that focuses on accelerating development of spoken language and, when the child is ready, helping them learn the same subjects as their hearing-age peers so they can be full participants in mainstream education. What sets it apart most is that sign language isn’t used at Ohio Valley Voices. Here, it’s all about talking.

Maria founded the program in 2000—beginning with only 16 students. Now the school is at max capacity with 55 and is looking to expand to both Dayton and downtown Cincinnati.

During a student’s average five-year stay, he or she learns the tools to be successful: how to talk, to be part of a hearing community—and to have confidence.

“Every parent walks into Ohio Valley Voices in crisis mode,” she says. “They all have a dream for their child, and they’re terrified they won’t be able to communicate with them. ‘Who is going to talk to my child? Will they ever say I love you? Will they be able to hear me say I love you?’”

As a parent of a deaf daughter, Maria understands the fear those families feel. It was this compassion and empathy that catapulted her into making her mark on children with hearing impairments. Her vision is simple: no child should go without. **CONTINUED >**

**SOUND BY SOUND, WORD BY WORD:
VICTORIES AT OHIO VALLEY VOICES**

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YOU'RE A STAR RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE



The annual Ohio Valley Voices gala is February 29 at Paul Brown Stadium. Hosted by Dave Lapham, voice of the Bengals, this year's All Stars Gala features cocktails, dinner, silent auction, dancing and raffles. An evening out for a worthy cause, all proceeds go toward tuition for children who can't afford enrollment. OhioValleyVoices.org/Gala





So why no sign language at Ohio Valley Voices? The average deaf adult who uses sign language can't read beyond a fourth-grade level. Thanks to the school's speaking-only approach, 73 percent of their graduates read at grade level or above (better than the national average).

"If you don't have access or opportunity to education, it's a very lonely life as a person with hearing loss. The average person doesn't sign, so you are instantly isolated from your community. And, if you can't read, you don't have access to *anything*," Maria says. "We give students the opportunity to choose what they want to be, where they want to go and how they want to live their lives. The trajectory of their life changes after they come here. We've taken who they were—and helped them blossom."

According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 3 out of every 1,000 children in the United States are born with a detectable level of hearing loss in one or both ears. That's why, Maria insists, capturing students at a young age is imperative.

"If we start them young enough, we can help that child learn to talk just like you and I," Maria says. "Your brain needs to learn how to talk—and that happens best between age 0 – 3." It is because of this early intervention that 88 percent of their graduates have gone on to higher education.

Ohio Valley Voices offers programs for parent-infant (beginning at six weeks), toddlers (18 months to three years), preschool and early elementary (kindergarten to second grade).

In addition to the direct study of speech and communication, the school has an on-staff audiologist who monitors students' hearing aids and cochlear implant needs. Parent support groups and education, summer camp for current students and graduates, as well as therapy opportunities are also provided. Maria has left no stone unturned—her mission is to empower the entire family unit.

"We have to win the race of learning—and we have to get it right. We ask our students and families to work hard ... they have to work twice as hard to make it look like they are hearing just like us—the by-product of that hard work and dedication is learning how to speak."

And making life easier for children who are already working so hard is one of Maria's biggest goals. She emphasizes that Ohio Valley Voices will never turn a child away because of tuition or financial hardships. The nonprofit school prides itself on awarding scholarships to those in need and leans on the community to help support the operating expenses of the program.

"There's nothing like watching a child learn and change and become who they are. We get to do that every single day. I watch them learn that first word, first sentence, the first time they yell at you—all things they're supposed to do. Every sound makes a difference."

Maria makes it clear: "We change lives at Ohio Valley Voices. Who wouldn't want that opportunity?"

OhioValleyVoices.org

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