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## Deaf Tennessee student finds success at RIT/NTID

*Chattanooga Times Free Press* - April 27, 2007

By Karen Nazor

“Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm.” —Publius Syrus

A couple of weeks ago, I received an e-mail from DaVonna Mason updating me on a story I had written about her daughter, Somer, 18 years ago.

“You probably don't remember it, but it was about a little baby who was born deaf and the whole family was learning sign language,” Ms. Mason said in the e-mail. “It talked about finding out early about children being deaf and how they could excel with help.”

“Well, I don't know if they put anything in the papers about making the dean's list, but Somer is 20, in college in Rochester, New York, and is excelling to her dreams,” Ms. Mason wrote.

She said she realized Somer was deaf three days after she was born.

“We started with the (TIPS) Tennessee Infant Parent Services with Susan Addison,” Ms. Mason said. “Susan worked with Somer until she was 4 years old every week, coming to our house and teaching us signs and speech that we could work with her. What wonderful memories we had in that special time.”

At 2, Somer began attending classes at the Chattanooga Speech and Hearing Center, Ms. Mason said.

Somer was eventually mainstreamed into the classes at Rivermont Elementary, where an interpreter accompanied her to each class, Ms. Mason said.

At Chattanooga High School, Somer was the first deaf child in the magnet school system, Ms. Mason said.

“I signed her up in the lottery and did not put that she was deaf,” she said. “She was picked. I took Somer to the school, and she was really excited because she had heard about all the different classes they had in art and music. When they realized that Somer was deaf, they told me they would have to get her an interpreter. She took tap dance, piano, Spanish, various art classes and photography (her favorite class).”

During her senior year, Somer had a cochlear implant put in at Vanderbilt Hospital.

“When they turned on the implant, she could actually hear our voices,” Ms. Mason said. “What a wonderful day for her. I was just excited that she could hear a car horn when she was learning to drive; she didn't hear car horns with her hearing aids. It opened up a whole new world for Somer.

“The principal at Chattanooga High told me he was leaving to go to another job, but when he found out that Somer was having the surgery for the implant he decided to stay on at the school so that when he called her name on her graduating day, she would hear him and accept her diploma,” Ms. Mason said. “He was such a wonderful principal and still is today.”

While in high school, Somer worked with hearingimpaired children at the Chattanooga Speech and Hearing Center.

“Somer has never met a stranger,” Ms. Mason said. “She always tries to make whomever she meets comfortable with her so they will not get frustrated with her speech or her signing.

“She went to Chattanooga State for her first year in college, just to see if she was comfortable with college,” Ms. Mason said. “She always wanted to go to college in Rochester, New York. I told her to go one year here just to see what college is all about, and if she was comfortable with it, we would see. Needless to say, she was comfortable.”

Today, the energetic, focused young lady, who is focusing on photojournalism and graphic media, is a student at the Rochester Institute of Technology, National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

“What a wonderful college,” Ms. Mason said. “They have closed-captioned movies in the movie houses, real-time captioning in the classes, and all professors have to be fluent in sign language to teach there.”

Nearly 3,500 of the 15,000 students at the college are deaf, she said.

“It is an amazing place to be. When we visited the college, I was so impressed on how they have everything that she needs to be comfortable,” she said. “Somer loved the college the day we went there. I knew we were going to lose her to New York.”

“Somer is a wonderful person,” Ms. Mason said. “She is happy (and) she is enjoying life to the fullest. She is making her dreams come true. She is so full of life and hope.”

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