

**FOSTERING COMMUNICATION:**  
Inspired by her daughter, Grace, Tiburon  
resident develops sign-language apps  
that promote inclusivity, p. 4



# GENEROUSITY

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THE TIBURON PENINSULA IN PHILANTHROPY

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# Sign-language apps aim to facilitate communication, inclusiveness

By **MICHELLE ASCHWALD**

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Grace Carter is scrolling through iPhone photos when she pauses and signs the word for “golfing” to her mother, Valerie — signaling she recognizes a photo of a family vacation to Florida where she learned to play golf.

It’s sometimes easier for 16-year-old Grace, who has Down syndrome, to use American Sign Language to communicate a word or a thought; she has apraxia, a motor-speech disorder that can make it difficult to speak.

“It is quite common for individuals with Down syndrome to have language delays like Grace,” says Valerie Carter. “She may understand spoken language but does not respond easily.”

Carter and her daughter started learning sign language together when Grace was about 6 years old and in kindergarten. Before that, Carter says, they mostly communicated non-verbally. Grace could say “no,” nod “yes” and do basic gestures and utterances, but the two were not having meaningful conversation.

“Grace could not tell me if she had a

good or bad day at school. She could not communicate who she played with at recess, or if she had a stomach ache, was happy, tired or sad,” Carter says.

The pair used a combination of videos, the sign-language encyclopedia and a private tutor to learn basic sign language.

“It was wonderful to have some communication between us,” Carter says.

As a former middle-school educator and children’s librarian, Carter is a believer in all forms of communication to facilitate the learning process.

When the family was living in Georgia, Carter would teach basic sign language to her students through stories.

“They loved it, and I realized then that there was no easy way for kids to learn signing,” she says.

After the family moved to California in 2012, Carter was no longer teaching and had the time to develop a sign-language tool.

“I wanted to create apps that taught sign language and disability awareness,” she says.

That year, the Tiburon resident started

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Grace Carter uses GraceSigns' Sign Me ABCs app while her mother, Valerie, and father, John, look on. The app is the second sign-language education app by GraceSigns, a nonprofit Valerie created in 2012; the first, Sign Me a Story, launched in 2013 and has garnered more than 100,000 downloads.

JOCelyn KNIGHT / FOR THE ARK

GraceSigns, a nonprofit named after her daughter that creates sign-language instruction and literacy apps. GraceSigns' first app, Sign Me a Story, was launched in 2013 on both Apple and Android platforms and has since garnered more than 100,000 downloads. It was followed last May by a second app, Sign Me ABCs.

Carter conceptualized and wrote the stories for Sign Me a Story and developed and orchestrated the production and content for Sign Me ABCs.

"The biggest challenge has been that I am literary, not tech-oriented," she says. "However, we have had many wonderful volunteer programmers, designers, artists and marketers help us develop both apps."

### 'Affordable and accessible' apps focus on inclusiveness

Sign Me a Story, which is free, uses reading to teach sign language, while Sign Me ABCs, which retails for \$2.99, uses stories, songs and games to teach sign language. Both apps are geared toward children aged preschool and up.

"Apps are an important tool in the future of learning," Carter says. "As different as each child is, that is how differently they all learn."

Particularly with Sign Me ABCs, she says, her team tried to incorporate multiple modalities to appeal to many different learning styles. The app uses sight, so a child can read a letter or word, see the letter or word signed and view an illustration that matches the letter or word. It also uses sound, so a child can hear a letter or word pronounced with accompanying music. And it uses touch, reinforcing the letters or words with interactive games.

Both apps include videos of Grace, some of her friends and other children of different ages and abilities signing.

Because Grace has always been dramatic and a dancer, Carter says, it seemed natural to feature her as the "face of the organization." Having other kids sign is also a way to focus on diversity and inclusiveness through the apps.

"We realized that we wanted to have our apps be for every kid, not just kids with disabilities, so we thought it would be important to include a range of kids as our 'signing stars,'" she says.

"Grace likes seeing herself in the apps but enjoys seeing the other kids just as much," Carter says. "She is quite a ham and has become accustomed to being vid-

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— Valerie Carter, founder of GraceSigns

eotaped and photographed. As she has become a teenager she is less eager to participate, but does like seeing the end result."

Carter says the goal is to create apps that are "tech-inclusive, user-friendly, and lively."

"We strive to make this affordable and accessible for all," she says.

Grace's speech therapist, Laura O'Grady, says the Sign Me ABCs app was tested with a lot of kids.

"Some kids are just wired to visually sign. The animals in the app are really loved by children of all ages whether they are special needs or non-needs kids — it engages them," she says.

"Grace is a techno-kid, like so many in her generation who spend time on laptops, iPads and smart phones," O'Grady adds. "This is a generation that has many learning styles in the classroom."

### Aiming for a wider reach

Grace, who will be a freshman at Redwood High School in the fall, now speaks more than she signs, Carter says.

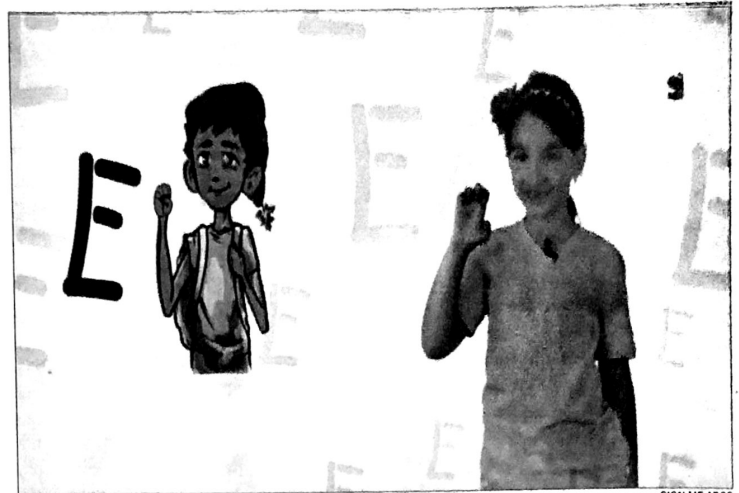
"We use signing as a prompt with her now to expand her language, to encourage her to use a full sentence. She only signs with a couple of friends at school who do not have language," Carter says.

For expanded language with her teachers and speech therapist, Grace uses an augmentative speech app that helps her expand her thought process and communication with greater detail and clarity.

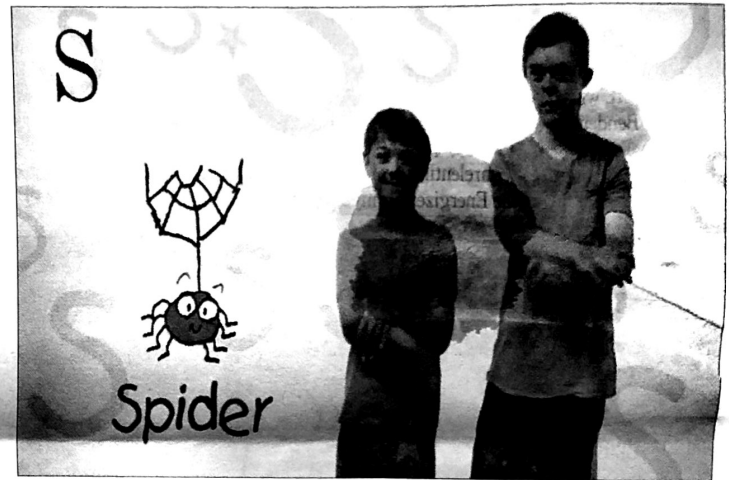
She will continue learning American Sign Language at school next year at Redwood with other students who have special needs, and she will attend art, drama and P.E. with the high school's general student population.

She'll also be busy with extracurricular activities. She was previously in the chorus at Hall Middle School in Larkspur. Some of her other hobbies include dance, martial arts, softball, cooking, swimming and horseback riding.

She and her older brother, Jonathan, communicate regularly online with FaceTime. He is a recent graduate of California Polytechnic State University with a mas-



Children demonstrate how to make the sign for the letter 'e,' above, and the word 'spider,' below, in videos that are part of nonprofit GraceSigns' Sign Me ABCs app. Tiburon resident Valerie Carter founded GraceSigns, named after her daughter, in 2012; Sign Me ABCs, the nonprofit's second app, uses stories, songs and games to teach kids sign language.



### get the app

Sign Me a Story is available for free and Sign Me ABCs is available for \$2.99 on both iOS and Android platforms. To learn more about GraceSigns, visit [gracesigns.org](http://gracesigns.org).

ter's in economics. Grace also has a half-sister, Elizabeth, and half-brother, Robert, who are in their 30s.

Carter runs GraceSigns on a tight operating budget of less than \$15,000 annually, does not take a salary and is seeking grants to develop future educational sign-language apps.

Grace's father, John, who has learned a little sign language through household interactions, says he's proud of Carter's effort and of the most recent app's potential.

"I am hopeful that the new application Sign Me ABCs will be widely adopted as a way for all of us to learn sign language

and more," John says.

Carter is doing her best to make that happen. She hopes to meet with the Reed Union School District and the Technology Center of Marin to explore incorporating Sign Me ABCs into school curriculums.

"I will be spending the summer promoting this app," she says. "There are many people helping our kids. I am just doing this little piece."

Contributor Michelle Aschwald has been writing for *The Ark* since 2006.

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