

SIGNED LOVE

JULIA RAHN (10) MOVES TO FLORIDA
FOR BROTHER'S EDUCATION

Design by Elliot Scarbrough.
Photo by Brandon Brooks.

She watched as they teased him. He stood on the outside of the group telling him enough people were already playing and it took him too long to understand their game. They ran away from him. She was too young to understand what was wrong.

Julia Rahn (10) grew up in a home where sign language was a common use of communication. Her family used sign language to communicate with her older brother, Garrett Rahn. By the age of five, Julia was almost fluent in sign and continued to learn as her conversations with her brother grew more complex.

"My parents knew [Garrett] was deaf just a few weeks after he was born when he was not responding the way he should have. I grew up around sign language and it was a normal thing in my family," Julia said. "While in Georgia, my brother went to a public school with hearing kids. He was bullied and made fun of. Even with an interpreter in all of his classrooms with him, he still fell behind in all of his classes."

Garrett was pulled from public school when a group of teachers, majoring in education for hearing impaired children, set up an education center at Calvary Day School. They called the program Sound Start, a program that offered never-before-available services to the Georgia and South Carolina areas. Through Calvary, the two-part Sound Smart program was able to reach the hearing impaired.

"My brother was a part of this experiment," Rahn said.

When the part of the Sound Start program, Garrett was a part of was shut down, the Rahn family did not want to send Garrett back to public school. Feeling confident 7-year-old Julia would adjust wherever she found herself, the family moved to St. Augustine, Florida. Nine year old Garrett was enrolled in Florida School for the Deaf and Blind.

"When we moved to Florida I could tell my brother was happier since he was around kids that were just like him. For the first time, he had people to talk to and laugh with," Julia said.

The Rahns packed their belongings, said goodbye to family and friends, and moved to Florida. Although they were sad to say goodbye, they found themselves living within a welcoming community.

"I lived in a neighborhood with a ton of other kids because my school was maybe [two] minutes away. The community was very close and everything was within walking distance of each other," Julia said. "I went to a public school in Jacksonville. It was a lot bigger than Calvary and I made friends very

easily."

The large number of children in the neighborhood helped with the transition. Julia and Garrett had many opportunities to make friends, leaving them feeling more comfortable with the move. Neighborhood kids welcomed Garrett's differences by expressing an interest in not only learning sign, but making him feel included.

"I brought my brother around all of the kids and they thought it was so cool that he could sign. Some of the kids even wanted to learn sign language," Julia said. "This made Garrett comfortable and he liked being able to play with all of the kids."

Julia took Garrett to the neighborhood playground with her. When the kids on the playground asked why Garrett could not talk to them, Julia told them he was deaf and they could communicate with him through sign language.

"Most of the kids accepted him and tried learning sign language. They would even go home and look the alphabet up and search sign language videos up," Julia said. "Garrett felt accepted when the kids showed them what sign language they had learned and would always smile and correct them if they said something wrong. When I would first introduce Garrett to other kids I would be nervous just because everyone reacts differently and I didn't want Garrett to feel any different if they didn't accept him. But when the kids showed Garrett that he was welcomed it made me feel so happy because I got to watch him interact with kids and he got to experience being a normal."

After six years in Florida, Garrett was 16 years old and Julia was 14 years old. Their parents felt Garrett was old enough to stay and board at Florida School for the Deaf and Blind.

"We moved back to Savannah because my mom felt that my brother was old enough to board at the school. We had no family in Florida and my mom really wanted us to be around our family and close friends again before I went off to college."

The Rahns packed up their belongings, said goodbye to their friends, and headed back home to Savannah. Julia's old friends welcomed her back into the city and school.

"I was really excited about moving back to Savannah because all of my family was there and I missed my childhood friends," Julia said. "However, moving was also kind of hard because I was also going to miss living with my brother."

Julia and Garrett hated being apart when they were younger, but the distance did not hinder their

ties.

"My brother and I were very close. We wouldn't sleep without each other when we were little. He has always been very protective over me," Julia said.

Phone calls and FaceTime were important communication tools to the siblings. At the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind, a translator translates Julia's phone calls so Garrett can understand.

Despite their separation, Julia knew it was best for Garrett to continue with the program so he could learn to make it in the outside world and get a job.

"There is a logistics and trade program that he can go through to learn logistics and trading so he could get a job in that field of work. I think this would be good for him and hope he follows through with this. But it's all up to him and what he wants to do when he has to get a job," Julia said.

Julia missed Garrett living at home with her and hanging out together in each other's rooms. Julia and her mom still catch

themselves using sign language to communicate with each other because of how they had to communicate when Garrett was living at home.

"My friends and their siblings find it so cool that I know sign language and they always want me to teach them new things," Julia said.

After moving to Florida with her family for her brother's education, Julia learned that it is important to make sacrifices for the growth of your loved ones."

"Living in Florida has taught me that sometimes you have to make sacrifices for people who really need it and for people you love," Julia said. "That has helped me to understand and accept making sacrifices for others.

Now instead of seeing kids make fun of him, she saw her brother smiling on the phone screen. He was happy and smiling about his new friends. She missed her brother, but she knew he was getting the life he deserved.

As they ended their FaceTime, without saying a word, Julia lifted her hand next to her face. Her middle and ring finger rested on her palm. With her index and middle finger, she tapped twice below her eyes. She moved her hand to her chin and tapped twice with her thumb and index finger.

"I love you, see you later." *Story by Addison Scarbrough.*

