

# Colleague

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

*Using New  
Tools to Create  
a Dynamic  
Classroom*



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## Colleague

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Managing Editor **Jennifer Scharnikow**

Editor **Jaya Bhumitra**

Creative Director **Brett Sizemore**

Art Director **Gayle Wheatley**

Director of Alumni Relations **Claudette LaCour**

Photographer **Ron Hall**

Copy Editor **Vincent Way**

Contributing Writers **Dr. Mirwais Azizi, Jaya Bhumitra, Dr. Rhonda Brinkley-Kennedy, Dr. Ken Canfield, Dr. Eric Hamilton, Vanessa Jahn, Jeffrey Lee, Dr. Jennifer Murphy**

### PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY

Administration

Dean **Margaret J. Weber**

Associate Dean, Psychology **Robert A. deMayo**

Associate Dean, Education **Eric R. Hamilton**

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Please send address changes and alumni updates to:

**Pepperdine Colleague**

GSEP Alumni Office

6100 Center Drive

Los Angeles, CA 90045

Tel. 310.568.5510

E-mail: [gsepalum@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gsepalum@pepperdine.edu)

To contact the *Colleague* editor, e-mail: [gsepedit@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gsepedit@pepperdine.edu).



# all signs point here

ELA ALUMNA ENCOURAGES EARLY COMMUNICATION  
WITH CHILDREN THROUGH SIGN LANGUAGE



“A **baby** uses **language** very early on – when it cries, for example. **Speech** only develops at 16 months, but a **baby** can say so much before then. Why wait two years to have a **conversation** with your **child**?”



**ETEL LEIT** was pregnant with her first child when she conceived the idea for SignShine. Leit, who had always been interested in languages, wanted to teach her daughter Hebrew, Leit's native language. However, because Leit's husband didn't speak Hebrew himself, she felt she needed to come up with an alternative form of communication that the three of them could share. That is when she discovered sign language.

While traditionally used for the hearing-impaired, Leit learned that sign language is also useful for babies that have the cognition to communicate and the muscular ability to use body language, but not necessarily the vocal ability to form words. "A baby uses language very early on—when it cries, for example. Speech only develops at 16 months, but a baby can say so much before then. Why wait two years to have a conversation with your child?" questions Leit. To emphasize her point, Leit describes how her second child started asking for milk and grapes at just seven months using sign language.

With this in mind, Leit founded SignShine, whose focus is to support the development of healthy young minds through play, music, and communication. SignShine provides families and professionals with the skills to connect with babies and children in meaningful and interactive ways, using American Sign Language for language acquisition, early literacy skills, and brain development. "Research shows that children that start signing as babies have a 12-point higher IQ by the age of eight," Leit offers.

But signing can be beneficial for older children as well, even up to the age of 10. "Children that sign are better readers," says Leit. "Because everything is very visual in first and second grades, children in that age group in particular can benefit from the visual cues that are a part of signing."

Leit graduated from the Pepperdine University Graduate School of Education and Psychology with a Master of Science in Administration and Preliminary Administrative Services Credential, Educational Leadership Academy (ELA) in July 1999. She says that participating in this program brought out the leader within her. She had always had an entrepreneurial spirit, but the hands-on program gave Leit a step-by-step approach to beginning a business, including writing a mission statement, establishing effective relationships with coworkers, and remaining true to the original vision.

"It's been almost 10 years and I still go back to the lessons I learned in ELA—how to resolve conflict, the best way to time projects," Leit says. "But it was the personal relationships with the instructors that really taught me to trust myself and pursue something about which I am so passionate."

At the moment, Leit is focused on expansion. She is writing two books, a parenting book (due in 2009), and a guide for using sign language with autistic children (*Signing for Love*, also due in 2009). In addition, Leit just launched an international Web site ([www.babysignshine.com](http://www.babysignshine.com)) to build on the current Web site ([www.signshine.com](http://www.signshine.com)). The international site offers numerous resources for families, preschool and elementary school educators, therapists, and psychologists from around the world that are looking for classes or programs, pictures and videos, and the latest research in signing. SignShine is even starting to educate other instructors to take the trademarked SignShine method into their own communities.

"SignShine is about helping families to communicate," Leit explains. "I want people worldwide to know about this beautiful parenting method because it goes beyond teaching the signs themselves—it teaches how to use the signs on a daily basis to establish routine, how to effectively promote language development, and how to develop a positive relationship between parent and child." ■

