

# THE FIRST STEP...



## Dear Readers

many years ago I promised my mother that I would write a book about my life.

I recently fulfilled her wish by writing, "Il silenzio è stato il mio primo compagno di giochi", an autobiography where I share my experiences about being born deaf and all the challenges I had to face in actualizing my dreams. The book was written with journalist Corrado Ruggeri and published by Newton Comp-ton.

This book is a sincere testimony of what I have faced in my life and I hope that other individuals who are deaf will be able to find strength and comfort in shared experiences and hearing individuals, especially parents of children who are deaf, will be able to gain a better understanding of deafness and have faith that all things are possible!

All proceeds from the book will go to my non-profit organization, CABSS, Centro Assistenza per Bambini Sordi e Sordociechi - Assistance Center for Deaf and Deafblind Children, in support of its early intervention programs. More information about my book can be found in the newsletter.

This edition of "The First Step...", also includes articles about topics that are linked to the work we do in the area of deafness and deafblindness and activities we have carried out during the spring season.

You will find an interview of Silvia Palmieri, the 2014/2015 "Fulbright - Roberto Wirth" scholar, who just came back from Gallaudet University located in Washington D.C. (USA), and an article about Stefanie Anarumo, American Fulbright scholar that CABSS hosted for 6 months, who carried out a theatre project for deaf and hearing children, using Italian Sign Language (LIS), American Sign Language (ASL), Italian and English.

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the activities at CABSS by attending our fundraising events such as the "Cuore di Roma" where guests enjoyed an evening dedicated to the musical and culinary traditions of the Eternal city and the premiere of "Le Nozze di Figaro" organized with ANLAIDS Onlus —Sezione Laziale that took place at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma. I would like to thank Daniela Traldi, the

president of the Associazione Roma per il Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, for her support. The event was a huge success, bringing together over 1,200 friends and supporters of both organizations.

In conclusion I would like to give you a brief update about the "Growing Step by Step" early multisensory intervention program for children who are deaf-blind 0-6 years of age made possible thanks to the contribution given by Nando Peretti Foundation. The project is moving forward successfully and the children are making substantial progress. Everyone at CABSS especially the children and families who attend the programs would like to thank Nando Peretti Foundation for providing this great opportunity to learn and grow.

kindest Regards!



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# SCIENTIFIC AREA

## The importance of hands for children who are deafblind

### *The Importance of hands*

A person who cannot hear or see must be given the opportunity to compensate for the missing information that these two distance senses provide. It is usually the hands that take over the function of the eyes and ears for the individual who is deafblind and because the brain is very plastic it is able to process auditory and visual information from the tactile sense. In fact, when fingers are used extensively for example to read Braille, there is evidence of increased cortical representation of the fingers. The area of the brain that was previously responsible for visual and auditory processing, can be reallocated to process tactile information.

For this reason, the hands of a person who is deafblind can become, in addition to their role as tools, intelligent sense organs, providing access to objects, people and language that would otherwise be inaccessible to them.

It is important to note that the brain is most plastic and adaptable when a child is young and therefore the earlier the child who is deafblind can learn to use his/her hands as receptors, the more likely he/she will be able to successfully use his/her hands to acquire information.



Not only do hands need to be tools and sense organs but they must also become the voice or the primary means of expression for individuals who are deafblind.

It is important that educators, parents and friends of individuals who are deafblind become sensitive and respectful to the hands of individuals who are deafblind. For example, just as you would never poke the sensitive eyes of a child who can see, you would never do this to the equally sensitive hands of a child who is deafblind, who hands must function as eyes. To ensure healthy hand development, parents, educators and friends must also learn how to read and interact with the hands of a person who is deafblind and learn how to present information so it is accessible to their hands.

### *Hand Development in the Child who is Deafblind*

If you think about the tasks of achieving early bonding, hand autonomy, object permanence and mobility for a child who is blind, one can't help to think about the compounded difficulty for the child that cannot see or hear.

Fortunately, some children who are deafblind have some residual vision and/or hearing that they can utilize to help them make connections and achieve developmental milestones that involve hand use. Education of the remaining residual senses of vision and hearing is critical in supporting the child who is deafblind achieve object permanence, bonding, hand autonomy and hand expressiveness which are all prerequisites to achieving a strong sense of self, language development and independent mobility skills.

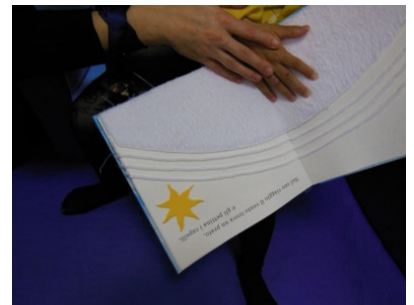
Children who are totally deaf and blind, must largely rely upon their hands in achieving, exploratory competence, gaining a secure sense of object permanence which often provides motivation for mobility, creating a strong sense of self worth and acquiring the ability to express feelings and ideas.

Without hand development there will be no acquisition of language,

cognitive development beyond elementary ideas and differentiation of self and the world.

When tactile exploration is not encouraged the child's hands will not learn to reach out for information and can often remain fixated on his/her own body.

It has been shown that hand development in very young children is closely related to their conversation interactions with primary caregivers. An infant or young child's first exploratory hand behavior is similar to self-stimulation, for example, hand in mouth. Often the child's first reaching out into the world beyond his/her own body is often the exploration of the body of his/her caregiver such as exploring the face of a parent or another person. When this type of exploration is encouraged and is positively reinforced, the child is motivated to reach out again and again which eventually develops into further exploration of the world.



It is crucial that hand development is supported in early development because for the child who is deafblind, hands are their primary connection to the world.

(Source: Miles, B. 2003. Talking the Language of the Hands to the Hands)



## Il silenzio è stato il mio primo compagno di giochi. The True Story of Roberto Wirth who was born profoundly Deaf

“Il Silenzio è stato il mio primo compagno di giochi” is the autobiography of Roberto Wirth, President of CABSS, one of the most famous and recognized hotelier in the world. He is the owner of the prestigious Hotel Hassler in Rome. The book was written in collaboration with noted journalist Corrado Ruggeri and published by Newton Compton. It was welcomed with great interest, not only by the general public but also by deaf individuals and families who have children who are deaf in Italy.

The content touches on delicate issues but at the same time takes us on a courageous journey of a boy that was born deaf, Roberto Wirth, who had to fight and confront many obstacles to actualize his dreams. In the book, we find the protagonist Wirth describing moments of suffering and joy in his pursuit of success in different situations and environments, situations that many individuals who are deaf also find themselves in. Roberto Wirth writes: “When someone who is deaf comes to the Hassler, I am immediately notified and I come down personally to welcome him or her to ensure that he/she feels welcomed, at home and knows that he/she has a brother at the Hassler.”

Many families with children who are deaf sent messages to Roberto Wirth because his story is a positive example for children who are deaf and gives hope that one day they too can be successful in accomplishing their goals. A mother wrote: “ Thank you Roberto Wirth for sharing your experience using strong and sincere words that a mother of a daughter who has been deaf from birth appreciates wholeheartedly. Reading this book has made me feel more at ease about my daughter’s future”.

The maternal figure in the book, the mother of Roberto Wirth, faced life in a positive way, even though she wasn’t able to give the love and affection that her son needed during those first years of life. She entrusted him to a babysitter who stayed with him in Milan, where he went to a specialized school for the



deaf. One day Roberto’s mom told him, “Roberto forgive me if I didn’t know how to love you. You became a success on your own strength, please promise me that you will share your story one day”. Roberto Wirth fulfilled his mother’s wish and dedicates his book to her.

The relationship that he had with his mother and father and the way they dealt with his deafness were very important aspects that Roberto Wirth insisted to write about. In the book it states: “You can never heal deafness but you can face it with technique and love. And if specialized schools focus on technique then the family needs to take care of providing love, something that was taken away from me very early on in life.”

His parents had so many doubts and concerns about him becoming a hotelier like his father and taking over the Hotel Hassler, a dream, according to them impossible to fulfill because he was deaf.

However, Roberto Wirth didn’t lose faith: “Silence was my first playmate. An affectionate and terrible embrace that never left me and never will. When people look at me, they think I am like everyone else because deafness doesn’t have any visible signs, it is an invisible disability. Often, an individual who is deaf is mistaken for a person who is hearing but in fact he/she is not.

I am a living testimony that a person who is deaf can accomplish the same goals as a person who is hearing, just like I did with determination, patience, courage, fighting against the world that wasn’t always

kind, against enemies in my family who didn’t agree with my choices and tried to stop me from following my dreams . Even though I struggled I was determined in making my dreams come true!”

The story of Roberto Wirth raises awareness about deafness and all that it entails for a child who is deaf. It is a cry that what happened to Roberto Wirth such as facing issues isolation, abandonment, communication barriers, lack of understanding from his parents about his need and potential will not happen again to another child who is deaf.

For Roberto Wirth, the well being of children who are deaf has always been an objective of his. In 1992, he felt the need to do something concrete for children who are deaf in Italy and established a scholarship, today known as the “Fulbright-Roberto Wirth” Scholarship. Thanks to this scholarship, young deaf Italian students have the opportunity to specialize at Gallaudet University, Washington D.C. (U.S.A), in areas of study that will benefit children who are deaf in Italy. Gallaudet University is the only bilingual university in the world that utilizes American Sign Language and English and is fully accessible to deaf and hard of hearing students.

In 2004, he founded the Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus, today CABSS, whose mission is to offer early intervention programs not only to children who are deaf but also deafblind, 0-6 years of age. Particular attention is paid to parents (in fact, as written in detail in the afterward of the book, by Stefania Fadda, the director of CABSS), about the symptoms they experience similar to ones found in times of mourning at the time of their child’s diagnosis. At CABSS, parents are supported until they acquire the necessary coping strategies needed to reach the constructive action stage where they are able to act in the best interests of their child, regardless of the emotions they feel about their child’s deafness or deafblindness.

# ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS

## Theatre for Deaf Children: a project created by Fulbright Scholar Stefanie Anurumo

*CABSS hosted Stefanie Anurumo, winner of the 2014-2015 Fulbright Scholarship, for American students who would like to study, research or carry out projects in Italy in the area of Deafness.*

*Stefanie, a student from the University of Florida (U.S.A), hearing and fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), won the Fulbright Scholarship for her innovative project of: "Theatre for Deaf Children: An Artistic Fusion of Sign and Spoken Languages". This project took place from January to June 2015 at the Istituto di Istruzione Specializzata per Sordi di Roma (ISIS') elementary school in collaboration with CABSS and the Fulbright Commission for cultural exchange between Italy and the United States.*

*Stefanie describes her interesting experience, enjoy!*

Implemented in January 2015, "Il Teatro per Bambini Sordi" (Deaf Children's Theatre) fused Italian Sign Language (LIS) and American Sign Language (ASL), in teaching deaf and hearing students at the elementary school level about the fundamentals of drama, the traditional Italian style of Commedia, Commedia dell'Arte, and Shakespeare.

Thanks to my Fulbright scholarship I was able to actualize my project of stimulating multifaceted integration, creative expression, and mutual understanding in theatre. "Il Teatro per Bambini Sordi" provided deaf, hearing, and special needs elementary school children with an innovative approach to the traditional comprehension of theatre.

Children learnt that an actor's primary instrument is their body and worked on their ability to incorporate an expansive economy of motion into performance, something

that is vital for character development and theatrical styles.

With this exposure to the arts and intervention of the principal skills of sign language in theatre, students gained knowledge of varying theatrical styles and texts, while simultaneously cultivating expression by way of combination of four languages - two oral and two signed.



Project objectives included intercultural communication, artistic accessibility, and full body engagement and the comparison between American and Italian Deaf Cultures.

The Arts have the incredible power to transcend all abilities, languages, cultures, and differences something which fueled my Fulbright project, and why it was monumental in its 'success. As a result of the project's creative transference, students who have never performed nor spoken in English nor ASL prior, were able to successfully collaborate, rehearse, and perform five final showcases ranging from *the Three Little Pigs* to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I understand the incredible ability of using the arts as a vehicle of mutual understanding.

My classes were held in a vast gym with high ceilings and ample staging space. I divided the space into three

sections: a didactic corner (where vocabulary and lessons were taught), a warm-up/movement square (where physical exercises and activities were initiated), and a designated area for the stage.

The gym was transformed for the final performance with costumes and scenographic designs created by the children, teachers and myself.

Due to the immense amount of support and assistance from the faculty, staff, and fellow colleagues at the school, I was able to successfully complete my project and create a new artistic space for the students.

I couldn't have been blessed with a more fantastic host affiliation. Upon my arrival, the President, Mr. Wirth, Director Dr. Fadda, and the entire staff at CABSS graciously welcomed me, made me feel truly comfortable, and continuously supported me throughout my grant period. Their assistance in assimilation into the Italian culture was greatly appreciated and made my transition much easier. In addition to their kindness and genuine care for my wellbeing both professionally and personally, I've grown tremendously and gained a wealth of knowledge simply by being in the same work environment as these incredible individuals. The leadership and organizational lessons I've gained while working alongside my colleagues, have been vital in my career development.

It has been a true honor to have been a member of the CABSS team for the past six months; the experiences I've gained have been life changing and the relationships I've formed I'll cherish forever.



## Interview with Silvia Palmieri, the 2014-2015 “Fulbright -Roberto Wirth” Scholar



*Silvia Palmieri, thanks to the 2014-2015 “Fulbright - Roberto Wirth” Scholarship, was able to specialize at Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. (U.S.A), where she actualized her project in the area of education and technology with the objective of improving the quality of life of deaf children 0-6 years of age. CABSS had the pleasure of interviewing her after she came back to Italy.*

### **As a person who is Deaf, what was your first impression, a year ago, when you arrived at Gallaudet University?**

I was emotional but at the same time intimidated.

As soon as I arrived to Gallaudet it didn't seem real that everyone only communicated in American Sign Language (ASL).

I immediately started to communicate with everyone in sign language and for the first time there weren't any communication barriers. I felt surrounded by brothers and sisters who were Deaf, in a Deaf Community extremely active, composed of Deaf individuals, each one with their own role and responsibilities.

Even though I was discouraged many times when I thought about the situation in Italy for individuals

who are Deaf, I used this as a source of motivation and welcomed any new opportunities that were offered to me and studied hard to make the most of my educational experience at Gallaudet.

### **What did you study?**

During the first semester I studied education and psychology, focusing on education and communication of

Deaf children.

I was struck by the different meanings of the term "bilingualism" in Deaf Education in the U.S., where the oralist method never took over like it did in the past in Italy. Being "Bilingual" in the U.S, means expressing in two languages, signed ASL and written English.

My experience in the U.S. gave me a better sense of Deaf identity and provided me with a new point of view of Deaf communication.

During the second semester I took courses in digital and narrative studies with the objective of integrating narrative and digital representations to create innovative educational multimedia that incorporates narrative and bilingual forms.

My studies in ASL literature were fundamental in acquiring a better understanding of narrative art. By developing an awareness of different narrative forms, I was then able to choose narrative forms that best motivated and stimulated creativity in Deaf children.

My studies in Graphic techniques were necessary in understanding how to implement interactive narration with animation and multimedia specific to children who are deaf.

### **Were you involved in other initiatives or activities at Gallaudet?**

I collaborated with the International

Visual Language and Visual Learning (VL2) center, where I worked with Doctor Malzkuhn, the Digital Innovation and Media Strategies Manager.

It was very interesting to see the work the Center carried out in the area of education and specifically how children who are Deaf learn. They develop and elaborate on various learning methods and techniques that use innovative, interactive and bilingual multimedia graphics.

### **What impressed you with the services offered to individuals who are Deaf in the US?**

The effectiveness of communication services. Individuals who are Deaf have the right to interpreter services. I was impressed with how accessible communication was in public buildings, hospitals and schools. Provision was considered "normal" and not thought of as difficult or uncomfortable. This concept of "normality" seemed to close the gap between the hearing and the deaf world.

Personally, I was taken back when I became aware of Video Relay Service (VRS) that allowed individuals who are Deaf to communicate in real-time with hearing individuals through a sign language interpreter utilizing video telephones or similar technology.

### **What did this experience mean to you as a person and as a professional?**

This experience was fundamental and contributed to my personal growth. It gave me the priceless gift of Deaf Identity which plays an important role in shaping our culture, language and much more.

Gallaudet has invested in me and my abilities, for which I am very grateful. I am motivated to continue my work in Italy and honored to be able to contribute to the area of research and development of multimedia resources for the Deaf.

## “Cuore di Roma” in favor of CABSS

Hotel Hassler, located in the heart of the Roman city center, hosted a charity event, “Cuore di Roma”, on the 18th of March in favor of the early intervention programs and psycho-pedagogic projects carried out at CABSS for children who are deaf and deafblind.

The event highlighted the musical and culinary traditions of the Eternal City, and was hosted by one of the most famous Italian journalists, Corrado Ruggeri.

Noted artists and famous people such as **Suor Paola**, **Nicoletta Romanoff** and **Camila Raznovich** attended the event. A concert was given by soprano **Claudia Toti Lombardozi**,

who entertained the event’s 150 guests with a compilation of Roman songs. Ms Lombardozi was accompanied on the piano by famous pianist, **M° Lorenzo Porzio**.

During the evening, nineteen of the most prestigious boutiques donated items to the charity lottery and included: Renato Balestra, Battistoni, Borsalino, Federico Buccelati, Tory Burch, Escada, Salvatore Ferragamo, Alberta Ferretti, Frette, Gattinoni, GemmaGì, Fiore, Imperatore di Capri, Loriblu, Missoni, Emilio Pucci, Tiffani & Co, Vhernier, Stuart Weitzman.

In addition to the lottery autographed soccer shirts of **Francesco Totti** and **Klose Miraslov** were auctioned off to the highest bidder.

This event was also made possible thanks to the generosity of the main sponsor **Econocom** and the sponsors **Private Banker Leopoldo Barocci**, **Studio Consolo**, **Studio Piccinelli del Pico Pardi & Partners**, and **TFT Building Management**.



*Roberto Wirth with Camila Raznovich and Nicoletta Romanoff.*

## Le Nozze di Figaro: CABSS and ANLAIDS Lazio coming together at the Teatro dell’Opera di Roma

There was a full house at the prestigious Teatro dell’Opera on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May where thunderous applause echoed throughout the theatre at the premiere of Mozart’s Opera, “Le Nozze di Figaro”, held for the first time ever in the capital, incorporating the breathtaking scenographic designs of famous director Giorgio Strehler.



*Left to right: John R. Phillips, Ambassador of the United States, Roberto Wirth and Massimo Ghenzer, President of ANLAIDS Lazio.*

Over 1,200 came out to the charity event in support CABSS and ANLAIDS Lazio in carrying out their respective missions.

The funds raised by the sales of the tickets were designated to the early intervention programs and psycho-pedagogic projects for Deaf and Deafblind children at CABSS and in supporting ANLAIDS Lazio in raising

awareness of AIDS in schools.

At the end of the opera, the President of CABSS, Roberto Wirth, and the President of ANLAIDS Lazio, Massimo Ghenzer, offered guests and sponsors of the evening with an elegant buffet dinner in the foyer of the theatre.

Guests included: The Ambassador of the United States, **John R. Phillips**, The Executive

Director of the Fulbright Commission in Italy, **Paola Sartorio**, Prince **Jonathan Doria Pamphili**, and the Director of the Nando Peretti Foundation, **Stefano Palumbo**.

CABSS and ANLAIDS thanks the Associazione Roma per il Teatro dell’Opera di Roma, presided by **Daniela Traldi** and the sponsors: **Enel** and **Sisal** (Black Sponsors), **Banca Euromobiliare** (Gold Sponsor), **Farindustria** (Silver Sponsor), **Amplifon** and **Ludovica Di Loreto** (Bronze Sponsors).



## Support us!

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**Donate Online** at our website: [eng.cabss.it](http://eng.cabss.it).

**PLEASE NOTE**  
Your donation is tax deductible!

### NOVITA'!!!



**Author:** Roberto Wirth and Corrado Ruggeri

**Editor:** Newton Compton Editori

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**Book format:** € 12,90

**E-Book format:** € 4,99

**Purchase a copy of**

*“Il silenzio è stato il mio primo compagno di giochi”*

**and support our activities in favor of deaf and deafblind children!**

**All proceeds from the book will go to CABSS Onlus**

Available in all bookstores. E-books can be purchased online at [ebookstore.newtoncompton.com](http://ebookstore.newtoncompton.com)

## Support CABSS by making a Tax Deductible Donation directly from the U.S.A.!

American citizens can now make a tax deductible donation to CABSS directly from the U.S.A. by taking advantage of tax deductions that support charities based in the U.S.A. (Sections 501 (c) (3) and 509 (a) (1) of the Internal Revenue Code).

This is possible due to the collaboration that CABSS has established with the **King Baudouin Foundation (KBFUS)** in New York, a well known charity in the world, which aims to offer citizens, companies and American foundations, the opportunity to express their generosity beyond the ocean, issuing a tax deductible receipt to donors.

Here's how you can support CABSS from the United States:

By making an **online donation** on the KBFUS website: [www.kbfus.org](http://www.kbfus.org)

and clicking on “Donate Now” and selecting “Giving Option 1: Non-Profit Partners Overseas” “Assistance Center for Deaf and Deafblind Children (IT)”.

Sending a **cheque** to: KBFUS 10 Rockefeller Plaza, 16th Floor, New York, NY 10020. It is very important that you make sure to indicate in the memo section of the cheque that your donation is going to: “Friends of the Assistance Center for Deaf and Deafblind Children”;

Through **wire transfer**. Please contact CABSS for more information.

KBFUS and CABSS both adhere to the values of integrity, transparency, respect for diversity and inclusion in the work that they do in improving the quality of life of the individuals

that they support.

For more information please visit:

[www.kbfus.org](http://www.kbfus.org)  
[eng.cabss.it](http://eng.cabss.it)



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per Bambini Sordi  
e Sordociechi  
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# FUNDRAISING

## Support CABSS by donating your 5X1000!

Supporting Centro Assistenza per Bambini Sordi e Sordociechi Onlus is easy; make the decision to donate your 5x1000. You can allocate a portion of your income to a non-profit organization.

All you have to do is write down CABSS' tax code in the space provided and sign.

Remember that the 5x1000 does not replace the 8x1000 and you can donate to both. In the case that you decide not to donate be aware that the portion originally designated in favor of nonprofit organizations will go directly to the government.

**Deaf and Deafblind Children need your support!**

**Make the decision to donate your 5x1000 today!**

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