

## Jessica Jordan-Hogan: Author Develops Relatable Superhero for Children with Hearing Loss



We spoke with seven individuals as part of our *Power of Representation series* about what it means to see deaf and hard of hearing experiences in popular culture. In addition to reading the series in Clarke Speaks, join the conversation on social media with #LSLRepresentationMatters.



Jessica Jordan-Hogan, children's author and teacher of the deaf. "As a fellow teacher of the deaf, Jessica's thoughtful and inclusive work stood out to the Clarke team, and the book is a classroom favorite!" - Ashley Mahlstedt Weaver, director of Clarke Philadelphia and a teacher of the deaf.

### An Early Drive to Connect Communities

Jessica Jordan-Hogan, author of *The Adventures of Billie Baha and her Super HEARo Friends* and teacher of the deaf, has always appreciated being part of a diverse group. "My mom used to always joke and call me and my friends the 'Little UN,' because we have somebody from everywhere," she remembers. "That was the norm for me. But I also realized, being a brown person, that I wasn't the norm for everybody else. Being able to get my experiences out there has always been something that I've been very passionate about."

### Find Out What Happens when Jessica Reads to Clarke Preschoolers...

Jessica Jordan-Hogan, author of *The Adventures of Billie Baha and her Super HEARo Friends* and teacher of the deaf, gave a virtual reading to Clarke preschoolers on World Read Aloud Day in 2021, delighting Clarke preschooler Billie, who also happens to use a Baha (bone-anchored hearing aid) and spell her name like the main character of Jessica's children's book, Billie Baha.

Watch Clarke preschooler Billie's excitement when she sees a child—just like her—so well represented in Jessica's book.



Clarke preschooler Billie.

After studying education of the deaf, with a focus on teaching listening and spoken language, at the University of Southern Mississippi, Jessica found a position teaching pre-kindergarten in Florida.

“We had kids from everywhere,” says Jessica. “All of the characters in my book represent one or several students that I’ve had throughout my career in deaf education.”

From her early days as a new teacher, Jessica has been eager to honor all of her students’ backgrounds and customs, teaching about the Lunar New Year or celebrating Mexican Independence Day with food, music and stories, for example.

“For the kids to try the food, make the instruments... that is a language lesson in and of itself,” says Jessica. “That exposure is important, because all my kids were different in some way or another. My students have had a wide variety of backgrounds—including methods of amplification and different abilities. I’ve worked with children with autism, cerebral palsy, speech stuttering, ADHD, arthrogyposis\* and microtia or atresia—to name a few.”

Microtia is a condition that causes missing or underdeveloped outer ears. It is commonly accompanied by atresia, which is a missing, underdeveloped or closed ear canal. Both conditions affect hearing ability. In working with several children with microtia and/or atresia, Jessica noticed a common theme.

“When it comes to abilities, my students with microtia/atresia were always the most insecure. They’d always want to hide their ear or cower away because obviously it’s something obvious and different.” This gave Jessica an idea.

## The Inspiration to Create *Billie Baha*

While she was on maternity leave, Jessica began creating a fictional world around a main character with microtia. “Because despite what I learned in graduate school, [microtia] wasn’t an anomaly,” she says. “I had one or two students with microtia every single year that I’ve taught. So, while on maternity leave, I decided, I’ll make my own materials. As teachers, we do that, right?”



Billie Baha, the four-year-old main character of *The Adventures of Billie Baha and Her SuperHEARo Friends*, who has bilateral hearing loss due to microtia.

Her vision included a hero with a realistic, multifaceted identity. “As a person who grew up predominantly the only brown person or Black person, I wished my teachers thought enough about me to show me in their class as well,” says Jessica.

Like Jessica, Clarke educators are committed to sharing children’s books and stories of successful leaders and personalities who are deaf or hard of hearing and non-white. Because the intersection of race and hearing loss puts students of color at greater risk of experiencing systemic inequalities than their peers who are white with hearing loss, understanding the interplay and impacts of various identifiers is essential to setting up a child for success.

“I think representation matters in every facet of life,” Jessica adds. “When my oldest was around two and a half, she said she couldn’t wait to grow up to be a white man so that way she could be a firefighter... She was also old enough to recognize that, ‘When I see a firefighter in books or on TV, it’s usually a white male.’ For me as well, growing up—I was always the only one.”

And that’s how *The Adventures of Billie Baha and her Super HEARo Friends* came to be. Incorporating the experiences of her students into her book was a treat for Jessica. “Having this opportunity to write down my experience in a fun manner to share with the world has just been amazing,” she says. “And how well it’s been received by so many people... It’s been awesome.”

“As a fellow teacher of the deaf, Jessica’s thoughtful and inclusive work stood out to the Clarke team,” said Ashley Mahlstedt Weaver, director of Clarke Philadelphia and a teacher of the deaf, “and the book is a classroom favorite!”

Ashley and her team invited Jessica for a virtual reading with Clarke students as part of a World Read Aloud Day celebration and to underscore the importance of acceptance and inclusion.

“We always value collaborating with professionals in our field and the preschoolers enjoyed interacting with a ‘celebrity’ guest!”



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## Ways to Honor Identity and Increase Self-Confidence

For educators who want to enhance a feeling of inclusivity in the classroom, Jessica recommends connecting directly with families, asking questions and doing research.

"I talk to families," she says. "That's always been my go-to, especially when we're working with younger kids. Developing a relationship and rapport with parents really opens doors. Because just like any other group—Black people, Hispanic people—we're not a monolith. So, at the beginning of the school year, I send a questionnaire asking, what religion do you practice? What special holidays do you celebrate in the home?" Knowing what's important to the families and children within her classroom community helps her share these customs and ideas with her students.

When in doubt, conduct additional research to help children and families feel comfortable and supported. "It's also helpful to do your own research," says Jessica. "I had a student with arthrogyriposis, which I learned from their parent. After our conversation I researched it. And then I came back the next day with questions, and that parent thanked me so much for taking the time to think enough about their child to do that research on my own."

As Jessica works on her next book, she shares an important message, "Don't ever underestimate a determined person or child. Regardless of where they come from or what obstacles that they have in their way. I remember when I was teaching, my class was observed by someone who'd been in the field for a very long time, and they were amazed because my three-year-olds were checking their own hearing aid batteries and putting on their amplification—independently... You figure out a way."

*\*According to the American Association of Neuromuscular & Electrodiagnostic Medicine, arthrogyriposis is a condition that results in decreased flexibility of the joints. Learn more at <https://www.aanem.org/Patients/Muscle-and-Nerve-Disorders/Arthrogyriposis-Multiplex-Congenita>.*