

# Communication 4 ALL: Join the Mission for Nonspeakers

By Elizabeth M. Bonker



**A**pproximately 40% of people with autism are like me and cannot use speech to communicate. That adds up to more than 30 million human beings who are locked in a silent cage.

When I was a child, conversations swirled around me, and I had no way to join in. One memory saved me from despair: my mother read to me. I drank in those words. She saw a sparkle in my eye and knew I was “in there.”

My parents didn’t believe the medical and educational experts who told them there was no hope for me. When I was five, my mother found a teacher who taught me how to point to letters on a letterboard. I learned to answer questions with words, then phrases and then sentences. When I was six, my parents fought for my right to be mainstreamed in the public school system. I skipped kindergarten and started first grade. My life went from hopeless to hopeful.

I am one of the lucky few nonspeakers with autism who have received a mainstream education. After many years in public school, I graduated from Laurel Springs Academy for the Gifted and Talented, an online K-12 school that warmly embraces typers. Soon after, I enrolled in Rollins College where I majored in social innovation. In May 2022, my valedictorian commencement address at Rollins went viral with more than 4 billion impressions around the world. My message of communication equality was propelled onto a global stage overnight.



**Be The Light:  
Elizabeth Bonker's 2022 Valedictorian  
Speech at Rollins College Commencement.**

Today, I am the Executive Director of Communication 4 ALL, a nonprofit with a mission to ensure all nonspeakers with autism have access to communication and education, just like I did. Our advocacy work includes keynotes at conferences and events, screenings of films like *SPELLERS* and *Understanding Autism*, and meetings with school administrators and legislators. We are using the power of media and public policy to change the way the world understands nonspeaking autism. We have a motor disorder, not a cognitive one.

Communication is a basic human right. Effective communication is guaranteed in Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Despite the clarity of our rights, schools routinely deny students with speech disorders their communication method of choice.

Today, with several thousand spellers and typers around the world, and dozens who have graduated from college, we are at a critical moment in disability rights history. Just as the Blind have braille and the Deaf have sign language, nonspeakers need typing to fully express themselves and be educated.

My cherished friend and mentor, international disability rights advocate Judy Heumann taught me to think big. Judy was known as the “Mother of the Disability Rights Movement” because her grassroots advocacy led to the passage of the ADA in 1990. Sadly, we lost Judy in March. I carry on our work always asking, “What would Judy do?”

Judy was famous for making “good trouble” and that is what we are doing with our two strategic initiatives at Communication 4 ALL.

Through C4A Schools, we are piloting typing programs with innovative public and private schools. Our partners train school staff members to teach nonspeaking students how to type. C4A Schools create beacons in the educational community that light the way for every nonspeaking child to be taught to type when they enter school.

If you know a school that would like to learn more about teaching typing to nonspeakers, please contact us.

In October we launched C4A Academy, a program of internet-based instructional videos to teach typing to nonspeakers anywhere in the world, free of charge. In every case, it would be preferable to have a live expert providing coaching and training, but that is not financially and logistically possible today. The Academy focuses on families without the resources for private lessons.

Our initial catalog of ten videos will grow over time and take nonspeakers from pointing to letters on three stencils all the way to independent typing on a keyboard. Expert trainers will be available to answer questions, so we will build a worldwide community of typers to offer support on the journey. If you know anyone who has minimal speech, please tell them about C4A Academy.

I invite you to join our movement for communication equality. You can take action now to amplify the voices of nonspeakers on social media, recruit a school or day program for C4A Schools or tell a family with a nonspeaker about C4A Academy.

To stay informed on our latest news and events, sign up for our newsletter on [communication4ALL.org](http://communication4ALL.org) and follow [communication4ALLorg](https://www.facebook.com/communication4ALLorg) on social media. Together, we can make “good trouble” until every nonspeaker has a voice. ■

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