

# Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz

Compiled & Written by Jodi B. Kinner  
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Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz is almost as well known in the wider Deaf community as she is in the Utah Deaf LDS community. Commonly known as “MM” (in ASL), she was born in Gooding, Idaho on August 25, 1961 to Deaf parents. Her father, David G. “Jerry” Wilding, graduated from Idaho School for the Deaf and Blind (ISDB) in 1955 and, after college, returned in 1960 to teach mainly science for 37 years. He also coached cross-country (16 years),

basketball (9½ years) and track and field (37 years). Jerry is also well known for his work with the Deaflympics, having run in 1957 as a hurdler and then having coached long distance track during five different Deaflympics from 1973 to 1989. He has also been involved with the Idaho Association of the Deaf in various officer positions including as president twice, and with National Association of the Deaf as an occasional



Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, 2010

delegate over the years. He has also been branch president of the Gooding Deaf Branch twice (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 23, 2011). Jerry has an older Deaf brother, George D. Wilding, who taught printing for several years at the Utah School for the Deaf and who was involved with American Athletic Association of the Deaf (currently known as the Deaf Sports Foundation).

Minnie Mae’s mother, Caldonia Della (Williams) Wilding was born and raised in Arkansas; her parents were also Deaf. After obtaining her associate degree from Gallaudet College, where she met MM’s father, Della moved to Idaho with him and has resided there ever

since. During her first year of marriage, she taught at ISDB as a PE teacher. However, when Minnie Mae, her oldest, was born, she elected to remain home to take care of her and the eight other children that she subsequently had. She has been involved with Idaho Association of the Deaf in various capacities over the years, including being chair of some conventions and two Miss Deaf Idaho pageants. In the LDS church, she has been in the Relief Society organizations for years, including as president three times.

All eight of Minnie Mae's siblings are Deaf and communicate in American Sign Language, and all of them feeling fortunate to have parents who provided them with a fully accessible language at home (ASL), as well as plenty of exposure to written English. The names



**Top (L-R): Minnie Mae, Doris, Lisa Lili, Cami and Ida.  
Bottom (L-R): Alan, Don, Della, Jerry, Terry and Sammy, 2011**

of the Wilding children in birth order are: Doris, Sammy, Lisa Lili, Terry, Alan, Cami, Don and Ida. They were born over a span of twenty years, so MM did not really grow up with all of them; when she left for

Gallaudet College, the youngest three at that time were only five, three, and one. Her youngest sibling, Ida, was not even born until during her junior year at Gallaudet. Even so, Minnie Mae and her siblings have had the chance to see each other often, though not always with everyone present at the same time (Everything Creative Episode 12, 2010).

From the beginning, Minnie Mae's mother Della introduced her to the magic of books and fostered her early reading skills. When she entered school at age four, she was already reading books on her own. Thereafter she spent as much time as possible reading, including when she was supposed to be doing chores! Needless to say, she was, and is a bookworm and has buried her head in thousands of books over the years (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal

communication, April 23, 2011).

Idaho School for the Deaf and Blind is located in Gooding, a small town with a population of 3,000. Since MM's father taught at the school, she and her siblings grew up in the town. ISDB had approximately 115 students during the time MM was enrolled there. In an interview for the Mormon Channel, Minnie Mae explained that since she lived so close to the school, there was no need for her to live in the dormitory; she walked or rode her bike to school daily. By contrast, most of her

friends lived on campus. "In the evenings, after dinner, they would get together, play, and have all kinds of fun," she said, "and I was at home." At the time, off-campus students were not allowed to return to campus after school. She expressed having "missed out" on the chance to spend that time with her friends. Eventually ISD



Minnie Mae, Julio, Tres, Isabelle and Briella, 2008

changed the rule, resulting in greater social involvement for Minnie Mae's younger siblings (Everything Creative Episode 12, 2010).

Minnie Mae remembers the academic environment at ISD as similar to that of a typical public school. The curriculum was essentially the same; the only difference was that her teachers signed. Like children at other schools, she learned, progressed and grew. Though her memories from her elementary years are few, she remembers having had good teachers. One teacher in particular loved horses and taught her students all about them. From this teacher, Minnie Mae learned names of the different horse breeds and how they walked, including different gaits (trotting, galloping, and so on). "I remember silly little things," she said, "because I had such great teachers" (Everything Creative Episode 12, 2010).

Because of her strong English skills and high academic achievement, Minnie Mae skipped three grade levels at ISD. By the time she reached high school age, the curriculum was

no longer a challenge and most of her academic peers had already graduated from high school. Consequently, she transferred to the local public school, Gooding High School, where the student population numbered 350, a huge change for her. Being educated alongside students and by teachers who didn't sign was, of course, another big difference. Nevertheless, she jumped into high school life there wholeheartedly, taking honor classes and participating in class activities such as Powder Puff football games. She was also elected to represent GHS as a cheerleader during her senior year. Needless to say, Minnie Mae counts her experience as a mainstreamed student as valuable. (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 23, 2011)

Years later, during the October 2010 interview on Mormon Channel, an online radio show, Minnie Mae responded to a question about the decreasing number of deaf schools and the corresponding increase in enrollment of mainstreamed Deaf students in public schools, and the greater focus on spoken English (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0I1MkQfr-CM>):

There are pros and cons to both sides of that issue. I was mainstreamed during my last three year of high school, and I learned a lot from that. The experience was very beneficial for me. I think I did so well both academically and socially because I already had a good foundation from having grown up in a deaf school. I already had my identity established. I've seen many children, though, who grew up attending public schools their whole lives who don't know who they are as a deaf person, and that can have negative consequences.

There are a lot of deaf children who miss out on a lot of things growing up in a mainstream environment, such as social skills. We need to use both ASL and English. Yes, English is important, but we need both languages. Some public schools have large groups of deaf students, and in situations like that, it is possible that these students do get a good, well-rounded education; but most public schools have only one or two deaf students in the entire school and then the deaf students are all alone and lost in a sea of hearing people [who don't understand them and can't communicate well with them].

For deaf people their (for lack of better word) "disability" is not a physical thing. Yes, their deafness affects their ears, but their disability, or, more specifically, the struggle that they face, is not a physical one but a lack of communication. If you cannot communicate with your peers, with your teachers, with your parents and siblings, how are you supposed to learn and how do you develop your own identity and your own self-esteem? How do

you develop [well-rounded] relationships? The list goes on and on (Everything Creative Episode 12, 2010).

Upon graduation with honors from Gooding High School in 1979, Minnie Mae enrolled at Gallaudet College, becoming a second-generation student, her parents having graduated from Gallaudet in 1960. At the time, the campus held 2,000 students, a tremendous jump in population for Minnie Mae, having grown up in a small town. As in high school, she jumped headfirst into college life, eventually becoming involved with many campus activities. She was director of student affairs in the student body government, the editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, *The Buff and the Blue*, and the dedication editor for the college yearbook, *Tower Clock*. She also worked as student head resident advisor for the freshman dorm during her senior year and was a member of the Phi Kappa Zeta sorority (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 23, 2011; Everything Creative 12, 2010).

When Minnie Mae entered Gallaudet as a freshman, not many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were enrolled there. In fact, she knew of only five students that were LDS. However, by the time she was a senior, there were about fifty members, including her younger sister Doris Wilding Millios. That year, Minnie Mae helped co-found a chapter of the Latter-Day Saint Student Association (LDSSA), an organization affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which offers LDS university and college students and others social, religious, and recreational activities (Everything Creative Episode 12, 2010).

Minnie Mae graduated with honors from Gallaudet College in 1983 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. Afterwards, she stayed in Washington, D.C. for an additional year to take graduate classes and to work. During this year, her brother Sammy and another sister, Lisa Lili, also enrolled at Gallaudet, making it four siblings enrolled at Gallaudet at the same time. There were also two cousins, Susie Wilding O'Hara and Melainie Wilding Garcia, enrolled that year, making it a total of six Wildings at Gallaudet. Eventually, all of Minnie Mae's siblings entered Gallaudet, though not all obtained degrees from the university. Most were very involved in college activities such as student body government, the school paper and fraternity/sorority life. Currently, there are five third-generation Wildings at Gallaudet: two nieces, a nephew, and two second cousins (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 23, 2011).

For her first professional job, Minnie Mae moved to Big Spring, Texas, during the fall of 1984 to work at Southwest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf (SWCID) as the director of the newly formed Learning Assistance Center. In addition to building up LAC from scratch, Minnie Mae also volunteered as sponsor of the Student Government Association and enjoyed the close-knit Deaf community in Big Spring. During her last year at SWCID, Minnie Mae received the Outstanding Female Teacher of the Year award, which she considers a great honor.

While at Big Spring, Minnie Mae met the man who would eventually become her husband: Julio Diaz, a native Puerto Rican. At the time, he was president of the Student Government Association that she sponsored and a student in one of the two English classes that she taught in addition to her duties as director of LAC. She was careful to maintain a professional relationship with him while he was a student in her class, and the two began dating only after final grades had been turned in. They married on October 8, 1988, in the Salt Lake Temple (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 23, 2011).



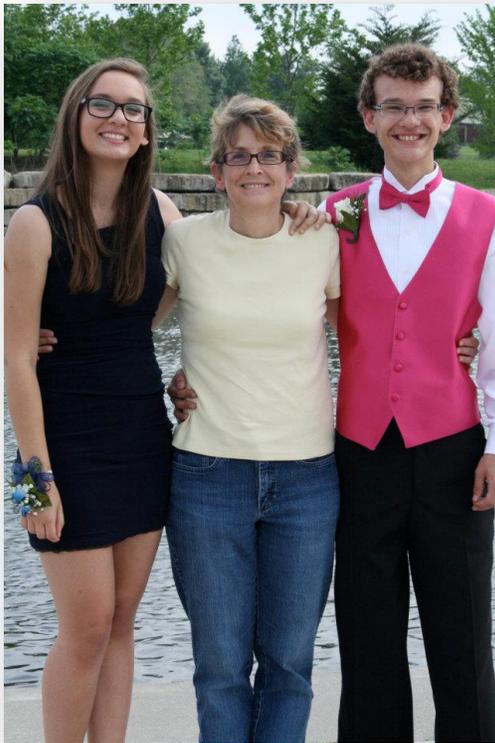
**Minnie Mae and Julio on their wedding day,  
October 8, 1988**

After three years at SWCID, Minnie Mae moved to Provo, Utah to attend graduate school at Brigham Young University. She also started teaching ASL at BYU, and English and ASL at what was then called Utah Valley Community College. In 1993, Minnie Mae graduated from BYU with honors and obtained a master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. Her thesis, titled "Deaf Characters in Children's Books: How are They Portrayed?" won Thesis of the Year for 1994 in the Linguistics Department (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 23, 2011).

In 1989, Minnie Mae was asked by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to be involved with the ASL translation of the Book of Mormon alongside Jack Rose (hearing) and

Doug Hind (CODA) who had met with church officials for the previous ten years trying to get such a project approved. Jack Rose had become affiliated with the LDS Deaf community through his work with Deaf members and investigators during his mission in southern

California. Minnie Mae had worked with him on other translation projects for the church, which paved the way for her understanding how to proceed with translating The Book of



Briella, Minnie Mae and Tres, 2012

Mormon into ASL. Included in her learning how to translate was the then-novel idea of translating English concepts into ASL without interpreting; i.e., without adding or deleting concepts to make the final product more “understandable,” a procedure that was fairly new in the ASL community. In 1990, she became the head translator on the project, an undertaking that took until December 2000 to fully complete, not because of the difficulty of the task, but because of numerous interruptions over the years. It was a huge job, nonetheless, that required not only transcribing English concepts into ASL onto paper, using a form of adapted ASL gloss, but also signing the ASL transcription onto video twice, once as a first draft for various people

to review and then for a cue tape to use during the final production. Throughout the process, Minnie Mae says she was “privileged to work with wonderful Deaf people throughout the country” (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 23, 2011).

In 1996, Minnie Mae got a job as an assistant professor at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC), where she taught ASL in the ASL Interpreting program. While at SLCC, she attended the Bilingual-Bicultural Conference hosted by the Utah Association for the Deaf in Ogden in June 1997. The conference inspired her to get involved with the UAD conference the following month, where she was elected to be chair of what was called the “Bi-Bi” committee. The main

task of the committee was exploring possibilities of bringing bilingual-bicultural education to Utah (UAD Bulletin, July 1999; Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 23, 2011).

As explained in “The Deaf Education History in Utah,” the Bi-Bi committee ended up becoming a non-profit organization known as Utah Deaf Education and Literacy, Inc. (UDEAL). On August 29, 1999, UDEAL opened a charter school for Deaf children called the Jean Massieu School of the Deaf (UAD Bulletin, July 1999).

Along with Jeff Allen, a hearing father with a Deaf daughter, Minnie Mae served as a volunteer co-administrator of the school during the first three years, and was on the board, either as the chair or as a member, for most of the six years that the charter school was in existence. Her duties as co-administrator included being responsible for hiring, curriculum development, grant writing and Individualized Education Program (IEP) implementation, as well as rushing to the store to buy needed art supplies when needed! In 1999, UAD honored the work done by Minnie Mae and Jeff Allen with the Golden Hand Award. Today, the Golden Hand statuette can be found at JMS (UAD Bulletin, November 1999).



**Minnie Mae teaching a class at Utah Valley University**

In 2001, Minnie Mae accepted a position with Utah Valley State College (UVSC) (now called Utah Valley University) to teach ASL in the ASL department. There, she earned her tenure and became an associate professor. It was during her six years at UVSC that Minnie Mae, along with her colleague, Dr. Bryan K. Eldredge, the hearing husband of a Deaf woman, Julie Eldredge, founded *Deaf Studies Today!*, the only academic conference for professionals in Deaf Studies in the nation. The inaugural meeting of this conference, held in April 2004, was a resounding success. The conference is now held biennially and has been well attended ever since its inception (UAD Bulletin, December 2003). Dr. Eldredge and Minnie Mae received the 2004

Trustees Faculty Excellence Award from UVSC for the recognition that the conference brought to the college. In spring 2007, Minnie Mae received another award voted upon by students: Teacher of the Year. The award served as a gratifying end to Minnie Mae’s working years, as she retired that year from UVSC after teaching ASL and English for a total of twenty-three years (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 23, 2011).



Julio, Minnie Mae, Tres, Isabelle and Briella, 2012

Because of health issues, Minnie Mae decided to become a stay-home mother for her three children: Briella (born in 1995), Julio “Tres” (born in 1997), and Isabelle (born in 1998), all of whom are Deaf and attended JMS. During the academic year 2009-2010, however, Briella was the one and only

freshman at her school. Moreover, one of Tres’ classmates decided to go to another school, leaving Tres the only student in his class at his academic level. During the summer of 2010, MM and her three children moved to Olathe, Kansas, so that the children could attend the Kansas School for the Deaf (KSD), an ASL/English Bilingual school. Her husband, Julio, had to stay behind, but joined join the family during the summer of 2011. MM works occasionally as a substitute teacher at KSD, but is mainly a “chauffeur, chef and tutor” to her children (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 23, 2011).

Beyond any doubt, Minnie Mae has done it all. With her high levels of bilingualism and biculturalism, in which she takes pride, she has contributed her skills and knowledge throughout her career: teaching in various postsecondary institutions, founding Jean Massieu School of the Deaf and Deaf Studies *Today!*, and translating The Book of Mormon, among other accomplishments. Her presence can be felt when Deaf and hard of hearing students are given an option to attend JMS, where they have direct communication with their teachers and instruction in ASL. Her Book of Mormon translation is posted at [www.lds.org/asl](http://www.lds.org/asl) for interested viewers to access and thereby better comprehend the Book of Mormon. If it were not for her commitment or

devotion to the Deaf community, none of these watershed developments would have come about.

## Note

Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, e-mail message to Jodi B. Kinner, April 23, 2011.

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