



A Giant Leap for Auslan Storytelling

By Hazel Edwards

Why have a book launch on February 29th?

Because it was Leap Day. And the photographic book *Where Did My Birthday Leap To?* was about 4 year-old Liam who had his first birthday.

"I'm 1 and 4," said 4 year-old Liam. "Both at the same time."

What was more significant at this Victorian College of the Deaf book and video launch was that the Auslan signed video made the story available for deaf children, simultaneously with those who could hear. It is the tenth book in the Visual Storytelling Resources project to make mainstream stories such as *There's a Hippopotamus on Our Roof Eating Cake* accessible for deaf children in Auslan (Australian Sign Language) which is considered an official L.O.T.E. or language other than English.

"Where Did My Birthday Leap To?" differs in that it is an original, formerly unpublished story written as a gift to Liam's family when they couldn't find any stories about kids born on Leap Day.

Maybe that's why there was a certain irony, that it was launched in the Auditorium of the Victorian College of the Deaf. An Auditorium is a place where you can hear. And this story was told in more than one way, by the interpreter signing in Auslan on the split screen, the author voice-over, the printed book, the amusing hi tech frog jumping and the other visual effects on the video and the family photographs which had been used from the real Donohue family whose 4 year old Liam was part of the factual story which attempts to explain to young children (and adults) the mathematical concept of only having a one in four year birthday.

It was a family atmosphere as MP Kirstie Marshall launched the book, accompanied by her baby daughter, while Viv White the CEO from the Schools Innovation Commission who have supported the project and other sponsors, students and friends were present for the family picnic, playing of the video and Auditorium launch.

As an author I've been to many book launches, but this one was special. Why? The expressive interpreters who dress in black so hands and faces will be featured. Vivacious faced, Principal Dr. Therese Pierce, Auslan signed her welcome and was simultaneously echoed, while teacher Kay Stevens who started the project, spoke and signed. I had to remember to speak more slowly and directly for those who also lipread.

A special Leap birthday cake was provided by the college for Liam who was helped to blow out the candles by children from the deaf community and from his extended family. And there was a leap frog race on the lawns.

As an author, I've also had my books translated into Chinese, Japanese, Braille and French, but the Auslan interpretation is the most engaging.

Why I Wrote *Where Did My Birthday Leap To?*

Math has always fascinated me. I even like the symmetry of some numbers. However, explaining the concept of leap year to a young child, is a creative challenge.

But that's not the major reason why I wrote "Where Did My Birthday Leap To?"

It was a gift of the imagination to my neighbor Cheryl when her first grandchild was born, on February 29th.

"I can't find any books about Leap Year to give him," said Cheryl.

So instead of buying the usual baby present, I created a story. Usually I don't use real names in my stories, but this time, the book was written for Liam and has local references to kinder, footy teams and family birthdays, which also have a universality.

We had a special literary link. The three children involved in the creation of *There's a Hippopotamus on Our Roof Eating Cake*, 25 years ago, were my then 3 year-old son, 5 year-old daughter and 7 year-old neighbor Lani, who is the daughter of Cheryl and the mother of Liam who was born on Leap Day.

So the three generations have been linked by books and writing.

A French puppeteer once exclaimed to me in disbelief, "You are a writer and you live in SUBURBIA!"

Yes, I am and I do. Stories have to happen somewhere. And they have to be genuine and based in reality to appeal internationally.

All children are fascinated by birthdays, especially their own.

When the Victorian College of the Deaf wanted to record on CD the Auslan signing of my hippopotamus books for their students, they asked for other stories too. I suggested using family photographs with this story as a way of sharing a home-made family experience. Teacher Kay Stevens was most enthusiastic.

Handy man and engineer Mal, the grandfather designed and made the Candle holder which has four fractions to make the one, and used left-over paint from other family furniture like a daughter's cot. So there are parts of a family's history in this story.

I see the book as an example of the type of story which any family can make and illustrate with their own photographs as part of their family history. It may inspire migrant families to write in dual languages, in the way in which this story will be visual in text and photographs, signed in Auslan and also voiced by the author.

It is home-made in the most creative way.

***Hazel Edwards is the Melbourne-based author of 150 books for adults and children including the classic, **There's a Hippopotamus on our Roof Eating Cake**. **Antarctic Writer on Ice** is in its fourth reprint, and is available on audio and in Braille, a YA eco-thriller **Antarctica's Frozen Chosen** (Lothian 2003) and an Antarctic play in **Right or Wrong** (Phoenix Education) are some of the writing based on her Antarctic Division polar resupply **Voyage 5 to Casey Station** in 2001. **My Dad's Gone to Antarctica**, (Lothian 2004) a picture book, is in progress. Recent children's books include **Stickybill TV Duckstar The Cyber Farm** with Hobbit director Christine Anketell. You can visit her website at <http://www.hazeledwards.com>. Married with two adult children, Hazel's hobbies are swimming, belly dancing and asking questions.*
