Finding her voice: Local girl, 12, makes huge strides at USM’s Dubard school

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Wilbur and Alicia McClendon moved their family from New Orleans to Laurel after Hurricane Katrina and enrolled their 12-year-old hearing-impaired daughter, Wilicia, at Nora Davis Magnet School. Wilicia could only say words like “mama” and “daddy,” and she communicated through sign language.

In August 2008, they enrolled Wilicia as a full-time student at the DuBard School for Language Disorders. By December, she was talking in full sentences and was easier to understand, her mother said.

She is one of hundreds of hearing-impaired students whose lives have been enhanced by the school at the University of Southern Mississippi. In 1962, professor Dr. Etoile DuBard was appointed to establish the School for Preschool Deaf and Aphasics Children. Fifty years later, the DuBard School for Language Disorders is still assisting children and families with communication.

Alicia McClendon said her family views the move as God’s way of bettering Wilicia’s life.

“I mean, she is really, really confident,” McClendon said. “It’s to the point where my accent from New Orleans and Wilicia learning language from New Orleans, it’s totally different and, when I say something, she corrects me.”

One word that Wilicia is quick to correct her mother on — “orange.”

“She has really gotten to that point that if she’s sees me with a dictionary, she’ll be like ‘oh, what are you looking for? What are you trying to spell?’ McClendon said. “She will try to help spell that word, too, which I think is awesome for her, coming from no language five years ago to wanting to help mom spell words.”

Today, if McClendon signs something to her daughter, Wilicia will tell her to talk instead.

The school teaches the DuBard Association Method, which includes multisensory teaching, cursive writing, precise articulation, color differentiation and other techniques to help children with their oral and written language skills.

The program serves 80 students each year ranging in age from three to 13 and each class consists of a maximum of 10 students. The students have a variety of severe language-disorders.

“They have been there for 50 years and it seems like every year the system is getting better every year,” McClendon said.