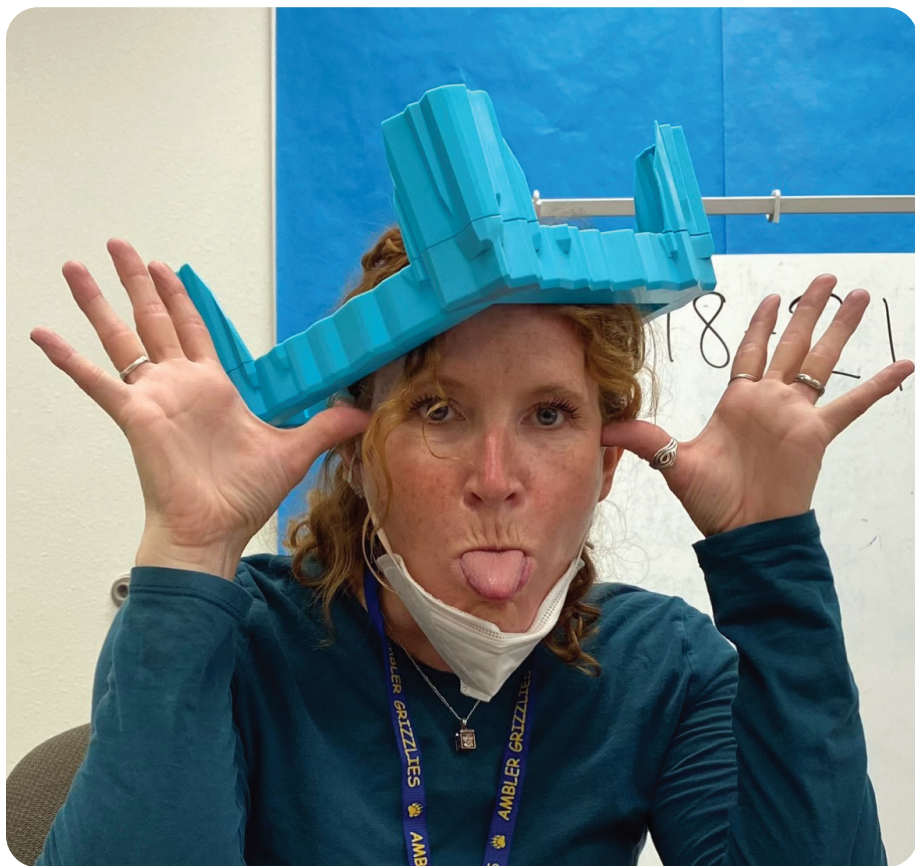


# For The Love of Conversation

Speech Pathologist Gretchen Stich

BY LAURA LIEFF



Some people get into their professions by accident, while others are attracted to a specific job from an early age. Then, there are professions people are drawn to because of a life-changing event. The latter is what got longtime local Gretchen Stich MS, CCC-SLP into speech-language pathology (aka speech therapy).

In 1997, Stich's best friend's mother had an aneurysm in her brain, suffered three subsequent strokes and lived in the ICU for months. Unable to chew, swallow or talk, Stich's "second mother" had to relearn everything from a speech-language pathologist. "As I watched this person work with my friend's mother, I knew that's what I wanted to do, too,"

remembers Stich.

She did some research and quickly found out that she needed to earn a second bachelor's degree (her first is in communication disorders) which she got in animal science. Stich was then accepted into a master's program where she earned her degree in communication disorders. Next, she completed her clinical fellowship and began working as a licensed pathologist in 2006.

Stich's expertise covers a wide range of speech-related concerns, including articulation (how someone sounds), receptive language (understanding language), expressive language (verbal communication), dysfluency (stuttering), cognitive issues and eating and swallowing issues.

## PLAY-BASED THERAPY

At the beginning of her career, she assisted the Eagle County School District for a few months and worked in hospitals but eventually moved over to private practice, so she could spend time with her clients both at their preschools and their homes. Although she can work with people of any age, she primarily works with early intervention clients, which encompasses birth to 22 years old.

"When someone with, for example, a 2-year-old contacts me, I immediately direct them to Mountain Valley Developmental Services, because it's a free birth to 3-year-old program," Stich explains. "Unfortunately, the waitlist is long, so if people want to start immediately, that's where I come in."

Bringing 17 years of experience, Stich is a "play-based therapist" which means that, instead of drill work, she helps her clients reach language goals by playing games. "When their hands are busy their mouths are busy talking, which is what we want," she says.

Stich incorporates the kids' areas of support into each session and then shares what was worked on (as well as strategies to try at home) with teachers, parents and caregivers. By working with clients both at their schools and homes, Stich "enters their world" and can then tailor her therapy to the child. She adds, "I like going to their turf, because then it's more client led. Seeing the changes in the kiddos from week to week is so rewarding."

## ALASKAN BUSH

When Stich is not helping Eagle County kids, she is in Alaska — sleeping on floors inside of schools. It's rugged and hard-core, but she loves it. "My school district job in the Alaskan bush is like no other," she says. "I live in the schools, sleep on air mattresses, bring my food and materials with me and jump in six-seater planes

on the regular. These villages have 200 people in them, so there are houses and a school, and that's it."

Because the areas she serves in Alaska are so rugged, and therefore don't have roads, she has to fly in small airplanes to get in and out of every village. Before Stich and her husband Micah had their daughter Violet 10 years ago, Stich went to Alaska two weeks every month. Now, she takes five trips per school year, and each trip is approximately 12 days long.

Her Alaskan connection started in 2006 when she was just finishing graduate school. A college friend had worked in Alaska and told Stich that the school district was looking for speech therapists, so she signed up. Stich completed her clinical fellowship there and "fell madly in love" with the people.

While there are challenges — such as having to sleep on an air mattress when she has had multiple back surgeries — Stich says she loves her work too

much to let "classroom camping" get in the way. "I never want to give it up," she says. "The kids I work with and the people I have met are rare and amazing."

#### WHEN TO REACH OUT

When asked how parents know when it's time to reach out for speech therapy help, Stich explains that sometimes a parent doesn't realize or hear that their child is difficult to understand, because they are so familiar with the way they speak. Therefore, that information sometimes comes from an outside source.

"Maybe a teacher or family member gently brings it up, and then the parents can't unhear it," she says. "When a child comes in, I use standardized tools that provide a percentage and standardized score. That information helps determine exactly where they are and what we will do next. For example, a 2-year-old kid should be using a minimum of 50 words, but ideally, it's 200 words."

Because there are so few speech pathologists in the Vail Valley, Stich is in demand, which makes logistics the most challenging aspect of her occupation. "My day is usually done by 1 p.m., because these kids are young and need a nap and lunch, which means I see them in the morning," she explains. "It's rare for me to meet clients after school, because they are busy. Additionally, I want to spend time with my daughter and husband."

All that being said, Stich strongly believes that she has "the best job ever and that having a knack for this is something special." She adds, "I'm always saying that the profession needs more people. Not necessarily because kids have more stuff going on — it's just that we know more now and have better ways to support. I don't see myself ever retiring; what I do is tailor-made for me." +

For more information, contact Stich at [slpstich@gmail.com](mailto:slpstich@gmail.com).

## Fall in Love with Your New Carpet

Find your new floor today  
We can install right away

Hundreds of choices  
in stock now

Area Rugs, Carpet  
Hardwood &  
Waterproof Floors

**RUGGS BENEDICT**  
We Know Floors



Serving the Vail Valley since 1972

