In Appreciation of Dr. Deborah Chen
— and Best Wishes in Retirement!
By Maurice Belote, CDBS Project Coordinator

Dr. Deborah Chen retired this summer from California State University Northridge (CSUN) where she served as a Professor in the Early Childhood Special Education Program. For over 30 years, Deborah has been one of our country’s most prolific researchers and authors in the field of deafblindness. The contributions she has made are enormous by any measure and have positively impacted children, families, teachers, administrators, teacher training programs, and systems. Deborah and her CSUN colleague, the late Dr. June Downing, were also directly affiliated with CDBS during the years that our project maintained an office at CSUN for our Southern California-based field staff members.

According to the CSUN website, Deborah directed or co-directed eleven projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education through the Model Demonstration, Outreach, Projects of National Significance, Research to Practice, and Personnel Preparation competitions. Here is a very brief description of three of these projects:


Project PLAI: Promoting Learning Through Active Interaction (1994-1999). Project PLAI was a research-to-practice project that developed and validated an early communication curriculum for young children with deafblindness.

Project CRAFT: Culturally Responsive and Family-focused Training (1993-1999). Project CRAFT includes modules and stand-alone learning activities to assist service providers to more effectively meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families.

(You may be getting an idea of Deborah’s keen ability to generate ingenious acronyms when naming her projects!)

In addition to her funded projects, Deborah’s publications are used throughout the U.S. and beyond to support the work of early interventionists, families, therapists and others. Two of her most recent publications include Essential Elements in Early Intervention: Visual Impairment and Multiple Disabilities 2nd Edition (AFB Press, 2014), and PAIVI: Parents and Their Infants with Visual Impairments 2nd Edition, coauthored by Gail Calvello and Clare Taylor Friedman (APH, 2015). Deborah also served as one of four Project Investigators on the project directed by Dr. Charity Rowland that resulted in the important publication, Assessing Communication and Learning in Young Children Who are Deafblind or Who Have Multiple Disabilities (download at [https://www.designtolearn.com/uploaded/pdf/DeafBlindAssessmentGuide.pdf](https://www.designtolearn.com/uploaded/pdf/DeafBlindAssessmentGuide.pdf)).
As a graduate student in the deafblind teacher training program at San Francisco State University, I had the good fortune to be trained by Deborah and Dr. Barbara Franklin, and Deborah supervised my student teaching in deafblindness. During these early teaching experiences of mine (which were not always a roaring success to be sure) I remember Deborah's astute observations, encouragement, gentle humor, and a positively laser-like focus on seeing what the students were doing and what I needed to do to help them move forward. I have met people all over the world who have said to me, in one way or another, how lucky I am to work in the same state as Deborah and to have ready access to her expertise and counsel.

Jackie Kenley, who served for many years as a CDBS Family Specialist, asked if she could write something in honor of Deborah’s retirement from CSUN. Here is what Jackie wrote:

When I tell people in the field of visual and hearing impairment that our daughter Laura’s first home teacher was Deborah Chen, there is a moment of recognition that our family was indeed blessed. Deborah came into our lives about 31 years ago, as Laura is now 32. Deborah was organized, cheerful, and had specific things to work on each session. She had started the PAVII project and it was such a wonderful part of our learning experience in those early years. As with all her work, Deborah had thoughtfully organized an inclusive and caring program for each family. Deborah worked with Laura and helped us all to see what positive things she was able to and would be able to do with patience and determination. Her encouragement meant so much to me. What an outstanding teacher and person Deborah Chen is and a gift to those who have had the honor to work with her.

We thank Deborah for the countless ways she has improved the lives of children who are deafblind. Everyone at CDBS wishes Deborah the best in this next chapter of her life and we look forward to continued collaboration with Deborah in whatever and wherever her work takes her in the future.

[The CDBS professional reference library includes materials from Deborah’s projects as well as many other publications she authored or co-authored. Contact anyone at CDBS for information on how to borrow these materials.]