

A Deaf person can start a successful  
cookie business.

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**Deaf  
People  
Can!**



**W**e all love heroes. Whether they are imaginary, like Superman, historical, like Thomas Edison, or modern day, like Mary Lou Retton, they inspire us with their extraordinary achievements. We admire their strength, brilliance, and skill. As we applaud our heroes, read about them, and talk about them, we hope that somehow the glory of their success will rub off on us. We look for something that we have in common with these achievers. Finding that common bond, we seem to share in their success. We are proud to say: "He's an American" (just like me), or "He's from Hometown, USA" (just like me), or "She's a woman" (just like me).

When deaf children see adults who have achieved something worthwhile, they, too, feel motivated to emulate these winners. When the admired achiever is deaf,

*Christine Wixtrom is a Teacher at Plainfield Elementary School, Yolo County, California. Artwork by Ms. Wixtrom's students.*

### **Christine Wixtrom**

this common characteristic may provide that valued bond of association for the deaf child, enhancing his respect for deaf people as a group, and boosting his or her own self-esteem. Successful deaf adults are inspirational role models for deaf children.

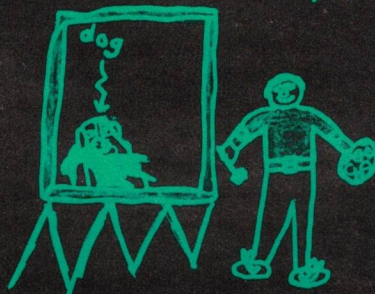
As a teacher of deaf students in a special day class, I wanted to intro-

duce my students to deaf adults who might inspire them and encourage them to follow patterns of success. I also hoped that meeting deaf adults would increase the students' basic level of self-awareness. These young students, like other deaf children who have little contact with deaf adults in their daily lives, expressed the expectation that someday they would become hearing adults. I hoped that opportunities to meet deaf adults would encourage a more realistic and healthier future outlook.

### **Creating an Awareness**

Though I was conscious of the importance of role models for these deaf children, I had to admit that demographical and geographical limitations can make it difficult to create opportunities for interaction with other deaf people. Our county has a low population of hearing impaired persons. The school is in a rural area, physically isolated from other schools and from the surrounding communities. It wasn't likely that the students would have much opportunity to

Deaf people can paint  
and draw skillfully.



a Deaf person can  
be a cook.



meet other deaf people.

Working within the limitations of our location, I decided to present information and activities with the theme: "Deaf People Can!" to guide the children into awareness of deaf achievers in the larger world. This would also better prepare them to appreciate any future opportunities they might have to meet successful deaf adults.

To introduce the students to this theme, I brought in photographs of deaf people I knew personally. I described their jobs, skills, and activities. I also brought in a scrapbook full of memorabilia that I had gathered during my volunteer experiences at the July 1985 World Games for the Deaf. Each day, we discussed some of the events described or pictured in the book.

Hoping to develop the students' appreciation for the language of the deaf community, American Sign Language (ASL), and to encourage a positive attitude toward the language of the hearing community, English, I brought in and prominently displayed two dictionaries, one labelled: "American Sign Language" and the other "Signing Exact English" (SEE). Above these books, I put a poster reading: "Wow! You can use TWO sign languages: American Sign Language and Signing Exact English!" I looked for opportunities to compare and contrast ASL and

English, developing respect for both languages. For example, during story time, I signed stories in ASL and in SEE, asking students to notice differences. During the students' reading time, I pointed out alternate ways of signing words and phrases, using both ASL and SEE.

The book, *Deaf Heritage—A Narrative History of Deaf America*, documents numerous achievements of deaf people.\* When I brought this book to class and told students that it was about the history of deaf people, they became very interested in looking through the pages (though they were unable to comprehend most of the text). After letting them thumb through the

**T**hen  
he danced  
around the room  
exclaiming,  
with delight:  
"I'm deaf!  
I'm deaf!  
I'm deaf!"

book, I brought out a prepared stack of index cards. Each card posed a question and provided a reference page number in *Deaf Heritage*. Drawing two columns on the board, I headed one: "Hearing People Can" and the other "Deaf People Can." I asked the students to choose a card with a question they were curious about. When someone chose "Can a deaf person play football?" I wrote "play football" to the left of the two columns on the board. I then asked the students: "Can a hearing person play

\*Gannon, Jack. *Deaf Heritage—A Narrative History of Deaf America*. National Association of the Deaf, Silver Spring, MD. 1981.

football?" "Of course!" they answered, so I put a check by that activity under the column for hearing people. The students then located the page in *Deaf Heritage* (listed on the card) that showed a picture of a successful deaf football player. "Yes, deaf people can play football!" they concluded, so I put a check by that item under "Deaf People Can." We listed other activities, skills, and types of employment on the board in this manner, always confirming with information in the book. (Examples: "Can a deaf person pilot a plane? See pages 194-201." "Can a deaf person become a doctor? See page 401.")

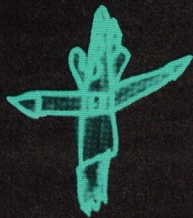
### Extending the Activities

After several discussions using these materials, I began a series of daily writing and illustrating assignments. The children were now adept at naming various activities that deaf people can do. We listed several on the board: "drive race cars. . . play basketball. . . be on TV." I asked each student to choose one idea to illustrate. Using a sample stem: "Deaf people can. . ." or "A deaf person can. . .," the students wrote sentences and illustrated their choices. They referred to photographs of deaf people as models for their pictures. The students mounted their drawings on construction paper, then posted them on a bulletin board under the title: "Deaf People Can!" After several weeks, we had a large col-

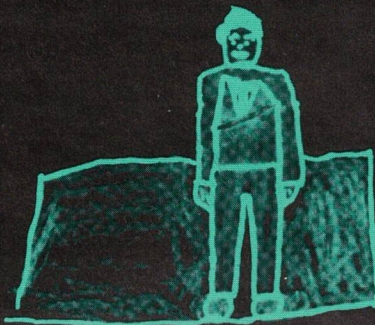
A Deaf person can  
be a school  
superintendent.  
He can be the boss!



A Deaf person can fly  
a plane.

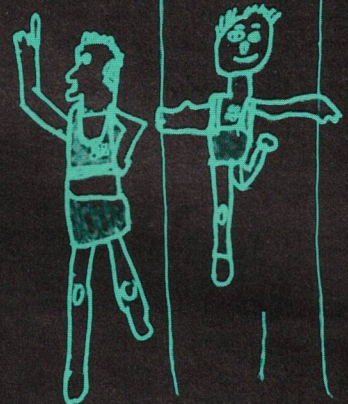


A hard-of-hearing  
person can be



president  
of the U.S.A.

Deaf people are  
fast runners.



lection of illustrated affirmations. I used a photocopy machine to make reductions of the original drawings for publication in our class newspaper.

#### Meeting Deaf Performers

Fortuitously, the next month the

For a moment, the children were awestruck; then they began signing with great excitement. After C.J.'s performance, we went to a drama workshop led by two actors and an actress from the NTD. The actors and actress introduced themselves to the children, cheerfully informing them: "I'm deaf, just like you!" and taking time to talk with the eager young deaf students.

These were exciting experiences, but I wondered if such brief interaction with deaf adults would make a significant impact on the children's lives. Answers to my question soon became clear.

During lunch, about an hour after we had watched C.J.'s mime performance, one of the young deaf students put down his sandwich and looked pensive for a moment. Then he sat up a little straighter and proudly announced: "You know, when I grow up, I'm going to be deaf, and I'm going to sign!"

Several days later, another student saw a newspaper clipping about the NTD on my desk. Noticing a word in the heading he recognized, he shouted "Deaf!" and begged me to cut out the word and give it to him. When I did, he eagerly ran for some tape. Carefully, he affixed the word to the center of his desk. Then he danced around the room, exclaiming with delight: "I'm DEAF! I'm DEAF! I'm DEAF!"

National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) came to a nearby city. Here at last was an opportunity for the deaf students to see deaf adults in real life. Another teacher and I arranged to take the students to see the NTD play, and to participate in two related events that were offered on the same day. Charles Jones, a deaf mime, would perform at an elementary school, and several actors from the NTD would lead a drama workshop at the local university.

I was looking forward to seeing the deaf children's reaction when they saw the many deaf adults who would be attending the NTD performance in the evening. But earlier in the day, the children were even more thrilled to talk with some of the deaf performers. In the morning, the students chanced to meet Mr. Jones, the mime, before his scheduled appearance at the elementary school. When he saw the deaf students signing outside the auditorium, he walked right up to them and introduced himself. "Hello! I'm C.J." he signed, "I'm deaf, just like you!"

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