

MOVING PICTURES OF DEAF IDENTITY: They Must Be Seen to Be Believed

Chris Wixtrom © 1998
chriswixtrm@aol.com

Note: 'Deaf' shows cultural affiliation; 'deaf' is a general term.

Deaf sociolinguist, Dr. Barbara Kannapell, in *The Role of Deaf Identity in Deaf Studies* (1991) records the sad fact that many young deaf persons are raised in family and educational environments which hinder or prevent them from picturing themselves as deaf adults.

"There is abundant evidence that young deaf people are confused about their identities ... deaf (university) students ... (admitted that they once) believed that when they grew up, they would become hearing (or) ... that they would die young."

They couldn't imagine themselves as grown deaf persons because they had never seen adult "deaf role models."

How might healthier self-images be developed? Kannapell calls for broader awareness about Deaf people, along with "respect for American Sign Language (and) ... Deaf Culture." She would like to see society realize "the equality of Deaf people with hearing people" and the need to take steps toward a "new and full recognition of the contribution of Deaf people to human achievement."

Dr. Susan Mather of Gallaudet University pin-points the vicious cycle experienced by many hearing families with deaf children. Having "little or no access to deaf culture or the deaf community," these families may fail to adapt to the child's communication needs. Such families - "deprived of the knowledge that deaf children are

seen as normal by the Deaf community" - take a negative view of deafness and may unintentionally send a message of rejection to the child.

This attitude discourages contact with Deaf adults, and the cycle continues. An alternative view positions Deaf people as "a community that could be enlisted to provide the family with a sense of a positive future for their deaf child."

Mather warns that "depriving a (deaf) child of the awareness of (the Deaf) cultural group's existence" may be considered a form of psychological neglect. Combined with "failure to provide full access to communication," this situation often leads to language problems that slow learning and further dim the deaf child's future.

Dennis Berrigan is the Deaf son of Deaf parents. A native signer, Berrigan states that his experiences with Deaf adults and skillful hearing signers were his "saving grace" in regard to questions of identity.

He has suggested that the ideal picture for the life of a deaf child must include "full visual access, ... best afforded by American Sign Language. ASL, he believes, is the most "natural means by which deaf children can acquire information."

Even if hearing parents do take a more respectful view of Deaf people and make the decision to try learning visual language, they may still struggle to develop sign skills, especially if they have no fluent signers to practice with outside class.

Researcher Dr. Carol Erting emphasizes that "Parents need a supportive environment ...

Hearing parents can learn ASL, but they must have the right opportunities for learning."

Educator and author Dr. Jan Hafer recognizes the challenge of reaching hearing parents who live in rural areas or other situations in which they "don't have access to deaf adults..."

She muses, "I have often thought, 'Where are videotapes?' I know there are some, but we need

(to create) more. ... Then we can take these tapes to the parents."

Such resources, she notes, would be especially important for the 80% or more deaf children who are in educational settings separate from deaf peers or deaf adult role models.

Some instructional videotapes designed to teach sign language skills carry an extra bonus. These

See IDENTITY on page 8.

IDENTITY/ ASL Must Be Seen to Be Believed

Continued from page 7.

videos may also "contain information that incorporates many aspects of Deaf life," says Professor Albert Walla, University of Minnesota. In his Deaf Studies classes, Walla makes use of "entertaining and educational" ASL materials, such as "videotapes that include biographies and interviews, poems, plays, comedy, movies (and) TV programs with Deaf characters."

ASL video publications are important, too, as expressions of free speech. Ideas and opinions presented in sign may be recorded on videotape and shared with the world.

Speaking for oneself is a basic human right which has often been denied to deaf people. The National Association of the Deaf recognized this crucial communication issue by dedicating the 1997 issue of their monograph to the question: "Who Speaks for the Deaf Community?"

Video publications give Deaf individuals another way to make sure their voices are heard.

Deaf activist Paddy Ladd envisions a time when "Deaf people (will) develop Deaf culture as a tool to start speaking to one another." Video promotes this.

When deaf youths have opportunity to "meet" or learn of Deaf heroes, authors and artists on video, hopes rise. Ladd affirms: "A fully aspiring people is one that has a strong sense of its own history."

Considering the many benefits ASL video publications offer, from Deaf-to-Deaf communication to increased public awareness, one would expect wide availability. Unfortunately, these unique resources are not well-known and are very difficult to come by.

Video stores and rental businesses almost never carry ASL videos. Deaf children and their hearing families have limited information about sign publications.

Often, friends and co-workers of Deaf people and even many Deaf people themselves are in the dark concerning the broad range of sign language materials currently on the market.

Even if people locate ordering information through catalogs or independent producers, few can afford large personal collections.

The fact is that for most Americans, ASL video resources are simply out of reach.

A new organization was created to address this situation. On October 31, 1997, ASL Access was incorporated as a non-profit resource aimed at putting ASL materials on public library shelves.

ASL Access provides information to the general community and specific assistance to public library staff.

Now a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization with its own web site (www.aslaccess.org), ASL Access has uncovered hundreds of ASL video and CD-ROM resources. Qualified volunteers have evaluated many of these videos and contributed to written reviews.

The organization has developed an ideal "core" collection of over 140 ASL video materials, with ASL literature, Deaf History, reference materials, dozens of sign language teaching tapes, and many other resources. Someday, these core collections may show up in public library systems across America.

Alice L. Hagemeyer, M.L.S., a Deaf librarian who is now on the ASL Access board of directors, has been working hard to inform people about communication access issues and ASL resources.

After sharing information at the American Library Association conference in Washington, D.C., in July, she participated in the annual meeting of The White House Conference on Library and Information Services Task Force (WHCLIST), held in Phoenix, Arizona during August. (Ms. Hagemeyer was delegate at large at the 1979 and 1991 White House Conferences.)

At the 1998 meeting, WHCLIST unanimously passed a resolution supporting ASL Access. The resolution included a statement from the National Association of the Deaf advocating the distribution of "ASL-based videotapes and related materials through our nation's public library system."

ASL video resources may be considered national treasures. The American people need to see them. Working together, people pushing for access can make a difference, helping public libraries unveil a new vision of free communication choice and positive Deaf identity.