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Passion for a Voice

For hundreds of deaf people, American Sign Language, or ASL, was the first language hearing impaired people had to the world. Brought over to America in the late 19th century from France by a deaf French man named Laurent Clerc, and hearing person Thomas Galludet; sign language gave the deaf a way to communicate with each other and with the community (Forbes and Rendon). This remains true today. Through Sign Language the deaf have been able to band together by forming communities where they may express themselves in the most nonverbal and passionate way. Signing is not done with just hand motions, as some people may think (Forbes and Rendon). It involves the most intricate of facial expressions, very similar to miming. When signing to another deaf person, the whole body is used to convey the feelings stated in the story. This expressive language allows the deaf something they have been denied; a voice.

Although deaf now have many ways of communicating with each other, problems still arise. Just as a person from America going to china would not be able to understand the Chinese without previous knowledge of the language, so is it the same with deaf. Sign language is not a universal language (Forbes and Rendon). Even within the U.S. there are still different “dialects” of sign Language. From one spectrum of the language to another there are four to five different forms of the language (American Sign Language...). ASL Proper is what is taught as exact and correct ASL. This is the language most commonly used in deaf communities, although as you travel away from this “dialect”, the language becomes more conversational. Signs may be adapted to form slang just as people in the

hearing world would adapt their own way of talking. In the middle of the spectrum is Pidgin Signed English. In ASL, saying “I want to eat ice cream now,” would be signed in ASL Proper, “Now eat ice cream I want.” Pidgin follows the English word order without signing every word; so the sentence, “I want to eat ice cream now,” would be pidgin signed, “I want eat ice cream now”. The last dialect of ASL is SEE Sign or Signed Exact English (Forbes and Rendon). This dialect of ASL was taught to deaf children to help them read, although it has now become a language unto itself that divides many deaf. SEE Sign follows every word in exact English without using correct ASL signs. If someone wanted to sign “carpet” in ASL they would point to the ground and fingerspell “C-A-R-P-E-T”. In SEE Sign it would be the sign “Car” followed by the sign “Pet”. Although this form of the ASL language did help children and people read English, it is conceptually wrong and hindered more than helped the deaf people.

With the constant task of struggling to communicate with hearing people, going to deaf social events are often a time to relax and catch up with friends and family. “Lack of communication,” which can occur from working in the hearing world, “inhibits the interaction between people,” (Deaf culture).for this reason, the deaf have become famous for DST or Deaf Standard Time. As opposed to events in the hearing world where people rush home as soon as the event is over, the deaf will stay for three to four hours extra, enjoying all the signing time they can get before they must reenter the world of voice. This basic need for communication among the deaf allows them special privileges to the way deaf speak with each other. In a personal interview with Corrine Morrow, an ASL interpreter and teacher at Spokane falls, she explained that the deaf are very blunt. While a hearing person would distract themselves from looking at an abnormal blemish on a

persons face, Morrow states that, “a deaf persons first signs in a conversation would be, ‘Oh, got another cold sore? Wow, that one’s bigger than last weeks.’.” This closeness also allows the deaf to speak their mind on anyone else’s affairs and the whole community may come together to make a decisions about something. Although their form of speech may be nonverbal, the deaf have as loud and passionate a voice as anyone else.

Within the deaf community there are different degrees of deafness. This is best explained as a small circle (the core group) engulfed by three expanding circles. The core group consists of people who were born and raised deaf, sent to residential school (a state school for the deaf), and are active in political deaf functions. The next outer ring may contain latent deaf people (people who are hard of hearing or deaf through an accident or illness but were born hearing) and interpreters who are still actively involved in the deaf community but didn’t grow up understanding the struggles of the deaf. On the outer most rings of the deaf community are people who were born deaf and had cochlear implants (an operation that places a metal receptor inside the head directly behind the ear; a small magnet is attached to the head and connected to a backpack which the person wears. The backpack transmits sounds to the receptor in the head, allowing the deaf person some degree of sound) or hearing aides for people hard of hearing. These individuals usually have hearing parents and are not actively involved in or even aware of deaf culture, therefore placing themselves on the outside of the community. Forbes and Rendon both agree that an interpreter or someone who was born with al six senses may never be apart of this core group, no matter how active a person is in the community, or how well a person knows the language. “If you are not born deaf you cannot become part of the core

group,” observes Forbes and Rendon as they talk about the acceptance into deaf culture (11).

This core group is essential to the culture and ethnicity of deafness. Within this tight knit circle are all the struggles and loneliness the deaf have had to feel in the majority ruled hearing world. Although none of the deaf today are old enough to remember the times before sign was introduced as a language for the deaf, through stories and heritage they can pass on the hardships their ancestors had to suffer through. From being misunderstood, not understood at all, being thought of as only deaf and dumb because of the inability to communicate, the deaf of pre-sign language were very alone in the world. Many deaf feel they can relate to this when they must deal with people who don't recognize or refuse to communicate with the deaf. “Many deaf people do not consider deafness a disability,” argues Cal Montgomery, a writer for the Ragged Edge Newspaper (The Formation of...). Instead, Montgomery suggests that it is the limitations imposed on deaf people's lives by the hearing world that inevitably disable and handicap deaf people. This is the common struggle that the deaf deal with everyday, and it is how they relate so well with each other. They share each others pain and frustrations while still making the most of their ‘disability’.

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