

NTID group awards advocate for deaf

Democrat and Chronicle - October 5, 2005

Chandra McKenzie offers service in many ways for more than 30 years.

By Staff Writer

Cynthia Benjamin

When the Lyndon Baines Johnson Building at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf was dedicated in 1974, the ceremony touched the spirit of a young woman in the audience.

Lady Bird Johnson had dedicated the building in honor of the former U.S. president.

Chandra McKenzie, a Rochester Institute of Technology student at that time, was amazed at the presentation.

"I remember standing out in the crowd, watching the dedication ceremony when Lady Bird Johnson got up to speak," says McKenzie. NTID is located at RIT.

"She was the person who did the official dedication of the building. It was the first time I realized that NTID was something special. It was not just a building.

"It was someplace that was going to really take off, and be its own community. It got me thinking about the deaf community."

The presentation inspired McKenzie to enroll in NTID's interpreter training program.

That was more than 30 years ago.

This year, the young woman who was so amazed the dedication ceremony received a top honor for her efforts to support people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

NTID's Deaf Professional Group has honored her with its 2005 Award of Excellence.

It is the group's way of recognizing and motivating hearing faculty and staff at NTID and RIT to include deaf people, writes Keith Mousley, an NTID math professor, "by signing in public, being sensitive to our needs and being advocates for us."

Mousley, who has worked at NTID for 16 years, was co-chairman of the awards committee.

McKenzie is currently assistant provost and director of RIT Libraries, a job she has held for more than three years. Before that, she was the associate director for 14 years. (There are three libraries—two special collection libraries and the Wallace Library, which is the main library for students on campus.)

"I started working at the library when I was a freshman," she says. "I was a book clerk putting away books and working at the circulation desk, that was my job...I didn't realized I was sort of practicing to become a librarian all my life."

She became a certified student interpreter for the deaf and hard of hearing. Since that time the program has evolved into a major for which students can earn an associate's or a bachelor's degree.

McKenzie, who can hear, no longer works as an interpreter.

"That was many years ago," she says, yet she continues to pursue programs that support deaf culture.

Under her leadership, for example, this year the library established the Deaf Studies Archives, which houses research, works from deaf artists, materials from faculty and other historical information.

“With Chandra...her first priority was to get everything accessible to deaf people—I mean everything—from video captioning (to) communicating with the staff,” Mousely writes. “She did a remarkable job. If you think back about 10 years ago...it is a big difference. The library even hired a deaf librarian!”

Joan Naturale, a deaf librarian and bibliographer for NTID, nominated McKenzie for the award.

She pointed to McKenzie’s achievements, such as her support of the Deaf Film Fest, which included facilitating the ordering and cataloging of films.

While Naturale lauds McKenzie’s work, McKenzie credits Naturale for much for RIT Libraries’ success.

“The best thing I did for the deaf community at RIT was hire Joan Naturale,” she says, noting her surprise at winning the Award of Excellence.

“I never felt like I was doing anything that was special, you know?” says McKenzie. “Being at RIT, you learn that deaf people are as much a part of the community as anybody.”

“I don’t look at deafness as a disability but as a culture. Everybody should be able to use the facility—without obstacles.

“You don’t have to go through anybody to converse with me.”

Email address- cbenjami@DemocratandChronicle.com