

# He keeps the engine running

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When a horn is busted, he 'feels' it

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As a car detailer and licensed motor vehicle inspector, José Silva uses all of his senses to perform his job.

"If you beep the horn, you can feel it," he explained. "If I can't feel it, I know the horn is broken. . . . Everything else, you can also feel it. The joints in the car, I can feel if they're not working."

Hearing the horn is out of the question - Silva, who works at AutoSmith Car Co. in Epsom, has been deaf since birth. But completing an inspection is so easy for him that he was surprised to be told, after earning his certification last month, that he was the state's first deaf licensed motor vehicle inspector. It's not the only respect in which Silva could become an inspiration for other people with hearing loss; he's also being included in a documentary film that features several successful professionals, ranging from a chef to a Miami Dolphins cheerleader, whose only commonality is their deafness.

"Deaf people can become anything," Silva said yesterday through the two interpreters who helped with the documentary interview - a hearing American Sign Language interpreter and a certified deaf interpreter who clarified if Silva could not understand the first one.

Silva wasn't looking for a career when he walked into Capitol Car Mart in Concord six years ago; he just wanted to pay off a car he'd bought there. Lee and Ken Smith, the owners, offered him a job detailing vehicles. He began teaching simple signs to his co-worker Pat Place, who was in charge of inspections, and Place began teaching him mechanics. Eventually, Silva moved to the Smiths' business in Epsom.

"I enjoy the mechanics part of the car best," he said. "I like to take all the pieces off the car and fix them and put them back and make sure it's safe and ready to go for someone to purchase it."

Silva is a valuable employee with a solid work ethic, but Lee Smith was apprehensive when she first hired him. She and her husband had never met a deaf person before, and she feared for his safety.

"I just thought that he would get hit by a car - I was ignorant," she said, smiling a bit sheepishly. "In hindsight, I just didn't understand, and I think that's a problem with a lot of employers. His other senses are more acute than ours."

The Smiths learned to wave at Silva or tap his shoulder to get his attention. They can write notes back and forth to communicate, and the Smiths have also picked up some sign language.

Deb McKinney, the deaf interpreter for the interview, said employers and employee were lucky to have found each other.

"He has a positive work environment with Ken and Lee, willing to learn signs, willing to have an open mind," she said. "And I think that's one of the barriers to deaf people getting jobs, is employers that aren't willing to have an open mind."

Fears such as Lee Smith's are one reason deaf people can have difficulties finding jobs, according to the directors of agencies who serve the state's deaf and hard of hearing communities.

Speaking through interpreters, Susan Wolf-Downes, the executive director of Northeast Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, and Dee

Clanton, the director of the Department of Education's Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, said some employers also worry about a deaf person's inability to use a phone in the traditional manner. (They can talk on the phone using a TTY, which can receive and transmit text messages over a phone line, or they can use a video relay service through the Internet that connects an interpreter to the other end of the line.)

Other employers might neglect to hire interpreters for big meetings or safety demonstrations.

But Silva's accomplishments, and those of the others featured in the film, prove that deafness is no obstacle to a successful career, said David Conyer, who interviewed Silva. Conyer is the executive video producer for Educational Design Resources at the Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf, which produces instructional, promotional and documentary programs about deaf people. The film will conclude a five-part series called Achieving Goals, which is aimed at high-schoolers and college students trying to decide on a career

Silva, who is a single father, hopes he will be a role model not just for young deaf people but for his son, Calvin, a fourth-grader, and his daughter, Amy, who is in third grade. He would like to open his own inspection and detailing business someday, although he's happy at AutoSmith.

And while a hearing person might assume that Silva would prefer to be able to hear, he does not miss something that, as someone born deaf, he never had. During a conversation about cochlear implants, which are growing more prevalent among deaf and hard of hearing people, he grimaced.

"Deaf pride," he said, signing emphatically. "Powerful deaf people."

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