Deaf Student to Attend a School With His Peers

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When Erik Banks graduates from Scott County High, he will not only cross a bridge to his future, but also build a bridge to close the communication gap he experiences daily.

Banks, 19, is the only deaf student at Scott County High, and the only deaf member of his family. He was born deaf because of a genetic irregularity and has spent his life around people able to hear.

That's about to change.

After graduation, banks will move to Rochester, N.Y., to attend the National Technological Institute for the Deaf, a school within the Rochester Institute of Technology where he hopes to study forensics. The Kentucky-Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, an organization that helps Kentuckians with disabilities achieve independence and suitable employment, is helping to finance his college education.

"The hardest thing for Erik is that he is a deaf person living in a hearing world. He has no deaf peers. It's challenging for any person to have no language in common with the people they associate with," said his mother, Nancie Allen.

In his new environment, Banks will have the chance to live the life he wants. At college he hopes to have a fantastic experience, study, "meet a lot of other deaf people like me," he said.

Shon King, a sign language interpreter for Scott County, has spent about three hours a day with Banks for the past five years and predicts that Banks will do really well socially at college because he can "make a friend out of anybody."

Banks attends classes with hearing students. He takes the same tests that hearing students take. When they watch a movie in class, they turn on the closed-captioning.

It's difficult to "take notes and try to pay attention (To King’s signing or the movements that his teachers' mouths make) at the same time," Banks said.

DeLana Adkins, a mathematics teacher at Scott County High School for 20 years, is currently teaching Banks pre-calculus and is "impressed his is taking such a rigorous course." Math is Banks' favorite subject and he said that he is "good at it because I get my math skills from my mom."

Banks explains that the most frustrating thing about being deaf is that people make fun of him.

However, he does have a group of friends that have made an effort to learn sign language from him so they can communicate better.

"My friends inspire me because the have tried to learn sign language. When they try, it helps me out," Banks said.

Being hard of hearing has forced Banks "to communicate with people on a different level. To talk with my hands and my eyes," he said.

He doesn't let his deafness keep him from socializing, though.

In his spare time, Banks collects YuGiOh cards, participates in Youth Impact, plays with his dogs and cat, is active at Minors Branchy
Church in Stamping Ground and participates in basketball, volleyball, soccer, track and swimming at the Mini Deaf Olympics in Louisville.

Senior Olivia Ellis, 18, who has known Banks for five years, said, "Erik always wants to know how you are. He is not just interested in himself, but other people,"

Ellis hopes that, "maybe he'll feel like he fits in (at college) – he won't get so picked on. He'll really enjoy himself and not hold back."

For now, his proudest moment came when he got over his fear of heights by going rock climbing at Kings Island. That list of proud moments is sure to expand in the years to come as Banks gets the opportunity to try new things.