ASL a Sign of the Times at San Dieguito Schools

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CARLSBAD ---- The quietest language course on La Costa Canyon High School's campus is becoming one of its most popular.

Since the San Dieguito Union High School District introduced American Sign Language as a foreign language offering in 1995, ASL enrollments have grown to 500 students at the district's three high schools and at Earl Warren Middle School ---- a 75-student increase over last school year.

At La Costa Canyon High School and San Dieguito Academy, more students take sign language than take French.

"I'm a visual learner," said April Williams, 14, a San Dieguito Academy freshman. "It's easier for me to see something and know what it means than to hear something and know what it means."

Being quiet can be fun, as Sharon Chrisman's ASL Level 3 class proved this week.

Students laughed out loud as she spoke with both hands and exaggerated her facial expressions and body language. At their desks, hands aflutter, students signed replies. And through it all, silence, save for the tapping of a foot and turning of a page.

As for the sound of silence, "Parents love us for it," joked Robin Newsom, a San Dieguito Academy sign language teacher.

Growing recognition

American Sign Language, which incorporates gestures, facial expressions and the "fingerspelling" of words that have no sign, is one of more than 100 signed idioms worldwide.

Newsom and Chrisman are among seven American Sign Language teachers employed by the 10,864-student school district. La Costa Canyon has started a waiting list for some ASL classes next school year.

The popularity of sign language reflects a statewide trend.

Four years ago, California's public schools offered 59 American Sign Language courses serving 1,608 students, records show. Data from the 2000-01 school year show those numbers trippled to 177 classes serving 5,380 students.

For high schoolers bound to the state's two university systems, taking ASL is academically productive.

The University of California and California State University systems both accept ASL to satisfy foreign language entrance requirements.

College may seem distant to David Thayer, 15, but the San Dieguito Academy freshman says he knows his strengths. Memorizing vocabulary words, like he once had to do in Spanish class, isn't one of them.

"Sign language is different," David said. "It's muscle memory. If you do it a lot of times, your muscles remember it."

Living silently

Because language and culture are intertwined, ASL students make regular forays into the deaf world, then write essays about their experiences.
The district's sign language students trade e-mails with deaf students at Cal State University, Northridge.

San Dieguito students experience a Day of Silence, where students may use only sign language or writing to communicate. With beloved telephones off limits, some teens found Internet messaging as their salvation, a conduit to their friends.

Newsom treated her class to pizza at a restaurant, with one catch: no talking.

That outing, together with Day of Silence, "taught me how difficult it was to be deaf," said Erica Bietall, 14.

A simple exchange of information, like ordering pizza, became complicated.

"The waitress got pretty rude," Erica said. "When she didn't remember whose pizza it was she brought, she just plopped it down. When she walked away, we couldn't get her attention."

Interactions with the deaf, however, are far more cordial, students say.

Deaf people welcome sign language students when they visit a coffee shop in Pacific Beach that has become a hangout for the hearing impaired.

"I really like the fact they're so open with people," said Emily Bronstein, 14. "They're not like, 'Dude, get away from me."

Emily and Erica bring a special talent to their sign language studies. Both are actors.

"That helps with the facial expressions and body language," Erica said.

Even when using spoken English, the friends from Cardiff talk with their hands, with gestures that resemble the brushstrokes of an impressionist painting.

Now they sign or finger spell when they talk to their friends.

"It annoys them," Erica said, "but it's like a habit."

Career opportunities

According to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, career opportunities abound for ASL students, namely as interpreters.

The institute estimates 28 million Americans are deaf. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, however, has only 20,000 interpreters as members and the registry's San Diego County chapter lists just 110 interpreter members.

The dearth of qualified interpreters has only increased over the past 25 years, with the passage of federal laws that mandate equal access for people with disabilities to public and private services.

Some San Dieguito students say working as an interpreter would interest them.

"A young person with ASL skills will surely be able to find many opportunities to provide access services to deaf persons in a wide range of settings," Robert Davila wrote in an e-mail to the North County Times.

Davila, who is deaf, is National Technical Institute for the Deaf's CEO and vice president of Rochester Institute of Technology.

"We are all delighted beyond words about the widespread developing interest in learning ASL," he wrote.

More people knowing sign language will bring more communication to deaf persons, Davila wrote.
"It is almost unbelievable," he wrote. "When I was a kid, hardly anyone had any interest in learning ASL and now it is a language that is attracting research interest and which is being offered in many educational establishments from elementary schools to universities. Beats anything I ever dreamed of ever seeing come to reality."

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