

# Deaf grads achieve a first - 4 RIT students break a sound barrier by earning degrees in the art of filmmaking

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Four students graduating from Rochester Institute of Technology today are making history.

They are the first deaf students to graduate from the school's film/video/animation program, which began in 1982. It's an exceptional achievement considering they had to learn to combine sound effects and speech that they couldn't hear.

"It doesn't matter if you are deaf or hearing. What's important is if you know how to make a film," said Stacy Bick, 23, of Ottawa, Ontario.

But learning to make movies wasn't easy. During one assignment, Bick filmed a scene while standing next to a vending machine, oblivious to the fact it was making a loud noise.

"When I showed it in class, everyone said, 'What's that awful humming sound?'" she said.

"The other students who will receive their bachelor's degrees today are: Damon Tidwell, 25, of Buffalo; Victor Medina, 28, of San Diego; and Sean Furman, 23, of Worcester, Mass.

Howard Lester, who leads the department, said, "The students managed exceptionally well."

Several other deaf students are studying film at RIT. Professors are finding alternative ways to teach students about sound.

"We've gotten better at working with deaf students," Lester said. "We have evolved."

For her final class project, Bick made an autobiographical film, Chameleon, which depicts her struggle to find her identity.

"Growing up, I lived as a hearing person but was always hearing impaired," she said. "But then I learned that

term was not politically correct. Then I was hard of hearing."

At the end of her 11-minute film, Bick states she is "a member of the diverse, deaf community. And that, I can stand on."

Medina gained confidence making movies. He felt he was initially labeled by other students as a troublemaker who would never succeed because he is Hispanic.

"But when I got involved in video, I discovered my hidden talents," Medina said. "The more people watched my work, they were shocked and impressed. I touched many hearts and inspired people."

Assistant professor Cathleen Ashworth said she struggled trying to decide how to give and grade assignments of her deaf students.

"When the assignments included sounds and visuals, is it fair to make the deaf student equally responsible? I'd always try to find an alternative assignment, maybe have them do something with a visual rhythm," she said.

During a class on sound recording, deaf students had interpreters with them to help with the editing equipment, Ashworth said.

"I always advised them to work with someone who has good sound abilities, or have somebody check their sound," she said. "That's the way it is in the field, where there is a separate sound person."

They all hope to ultimately be successful in the movie business.

Tidwell said he was inspired by the movies *Car Wash* and *The Wiz* and dreams of making a movie that inspires others in the African-American community.

And Furman said he'd like to work making movies, but realized he would have to start at the bottom. He would also consider teaching high school students - deaf or hearing - how to express themselves through film and video.

"My wish is that they would think about how they can bridge the gap between the deaf community, and they could make products for the deaf community also," Ashworth said. "I see that as their perfect strength."

Lester has been contacted in the past by producers wanting qualified deaf crew members to work on films marketed for the deaf community, but said the deaf students work just as well on mainstream films.

As one of the first deaf graduates of the program, Bick hopes other deaf students will realize they can do the

same.

"The main key is to be self-confident about who you are and don't let your disability be a barrier," she said.