

## Where Sign Language Is Far From Foreign

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ROCHESTER, N.Y., Dec. 22 — Waiters take orders using

American Sign Language. Doctors' offices are equipped with

videophones that flash rather than ring. The latest movies are shown with captions.

Tucked in the western part of New York, Rochester is home to the nation's largest deaf population per capita, with about 90,000 people who are deaf or hard of hearing living among the metropolitan area's 700,000 residents. The city's

transformation began in 1968 with the opening of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

The community's embracing of all things deaf has provided comfort to a city where many industries and young people have fled for more prosperous parts in recent years.

"What's happening in Rochester today will influence the rest of the country years from now," said Thomas Holcomb, a professor of deaf studies from Ohlone College in Fremont, Calif. "It's on the frontier."

It is here that the world of the deaf intersects the world of the hearing as in no other city.

"People outside Rochester know us for that," said Maggie Brooks, the executive of Monroe County. "We're proving ourselves as a leader."

This was not always the case. When the institute was established here with the notion of offering the most mainstream environment possible, open not only to signers but to nonsigners alike, controversy swirled like snow in February off Lake Ontario.

"People were honestly scared," Professor Holcomb, who is deaf, said through an interpreter. With signing at the root of the deaf culture, "they thought it would destroy everything we cherished, and the future of American Sign

Language was in doubt," he said.

Despite that initial concern, the student population here has grown from a few dozen in its first year to hundreds. What's more, many have settled in the community. And that has attracted other deaf people

with no connection to the college.

Francis Kimmes, who moved here in 1972, was born deaf to parents who were not, and for years struggled with a sense of isolation.

Mr. Kimmes, 60, knew only three other deaf people in his hometown, Niagara Falls, so he communicated with the world through a frustrating mix of lip reading and gesturing. But in Rochester he found he could make friends and

lead an active life using his first real language, American Sign. He joined a Catholic church for the deaf, found work on the assembly line at Eastman Kodak, married, and raised two sons.

“I felt more free,” Mr. Kimmes said through an interpreter. “It hit me. It was powerful. I realized, there was no real life back there, where I was.”

As the deaf population has grown, the city has changed. T. Alan Hurwitz, dean of the institute, said he has noticed that in the last few years, the city has created more opportunities for deaf people to be part of the community.

“It’s everywhere you go,” Dr. Hurwitz said through an interpreter.

Three movie theaters show newly released films with captions. Nearly all of the high schools offer sign-language classes. The Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester employs a deaf docent.

That can have a deep effect on newcomers.

“When I came to Rochester, people would attempt to sign; it was so neat,” said Lizzie Sorkin, 25, a senior at the college, and the first deaf student president of the entire Rochester Institute of Technology campus, which includes 15,000 hearing students and 1,200 deaf students at the institute. “I feel like I’m not deaf. I’m a person.”

In the last few years, there has also been an influx of deaf doctors, a rare comfort to patients who do not want to discuss their health in front of an interpreter. Dozens of other professionals, including real estate and insurance agents and bank officers — all of them either deaf or fluent in sign language — are part of the community.

“When I first moved here, I was shocked to see so many deaf people,” Alexandra Ling, 23, who came from the Boston area to attend the institute here, wrote in an e-mail message. “I decided to stay here because I felt really comfortable. People at stores and restaurants understand deafness, so there’s a lot less communication barriers even though they are hearing.”

When Spencer Phillips moved to this city three years ago, it was the end of a long and often difficult journey that had begun in a slippery backyard waterslide. Mr. Phillips was 7 when he fell and struck his head, and that night he lost most of his ability to hear.

As he grew up in Los Angeles, he knew he was different, though he did not consider himself deaf. That changed when at age 19, Mr. Phillips, a Mormon, chose to live among deaf adults and learn sign language for a two-year-ministry project.

“I realized it was part of who I was, too,” he said recently.

He was 27 and finishing law school in Utah when he read a magazine article about a deaf doctor who had opened a practice in Rochester. “I thought, that is so cool,” he said. “Why not go to where she is?”

Mr. Phillips won a two-year legal fellowship to help the underserved deaf community, and never left.

As for the deaf community's fears that a mainstream college would spell the death of American Sign Language, Dr. Holcomb said those concerns have melted away. Indeed, the number of interpreters, professionals and services has sharply risen. “I can see that spreading across the country,” he said. “It's a great model.”

Parker Zack, a real estate agent, has observed more people in Rochester trying to sign, even finger spell, than in other cities where he has lived. Mr. Zack, 50, who can hear, became obsessed with sign language after watching his deaf aunt and uncle converse growing up.

“The way they would communicate with each other was so beautiful,” he said. “It was like artwork.”

As a student at the University of Rochester, Mr. Zack became friendly with several deaf people, who suggested that he pursue his master's degree at Gallaudet University for the deaf in Washington. He did, and after receiving his master's in psychology, he joined the faculty there, becoming a director of student life.

But a request by a friend who was a real estate agent to interpret for her deaf clients changed his career. The agent made missteps, he said. “Deaf people don't care how quiet the house is,” he said. When the couple was ready to buy, they showed up on his doorstep. “They didn't go to their agent,” he said. “They came to me.”

With that, Mr. Zack became a real estate agent who specialized in serving the deaf. After working in Virginia, he returned to Rochester, where about 70 percent of his clients are deaf, he said. “I find it a lot better use of my counseling degree than sitting in a cubicle somewhere typing memos,” he said.

And he has never lacked for clients.

“There are always deaf people moving here,” he said.

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