

CBS Sunday Morning: Sign City --Part Two



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A Deaf Family: Hearing With The Heart

Choosing The Right Path For Their Deaf Children

By his second birthday, Scott Matchett was learning sign language the way other toddlers learn baby talk. American Sign Language is the language of the world into which he was born.

Nine now, Scott has never known anything but that world, a world in which he is normal, in which he is understood.

The Matchetts, all of them, are deaf - not just Scott and his 7-year-old sister Kara, but their parents, Doug and Mary Karol, as well. There is a world hearing people rarely even glimpse, even in Rochester, N.Y. CBS News Sunday Morning Correspondent Martha Teichner reports.

The Matchetts are so like everybody else. But, at the same time, they are so different. The Matchetts have technology to thank for a quality of life and access to the rest of the world that was unknown to the deaf a generation ago.

Such technology has enabled the whole family to have more fun. But as he watches his children enjoy themselves, Doug recalls the pain of a childhood defined by isolation.

"I scared people away. Some kids made fun of me," he says.

It helped that, growing up, he was a champion swimmer. But public school was lonely and hard for him. In Doug's estimation, he lives in a no-man's land: "To the hearing world, I'm deaf, and to the deaf world, I'm hearing...because I can speak."

And he was expected to speak and lip read exclusively so he could get along in the hearing world. He didn't even learn sign language until he was 22.

As for his wife, at the age of 3, Mary Karol was sent away to a deaf school where she, too, was taught to speak and lip read, but not how to sign. At 8, she was transferred to a local Catholic school where she was the only deaf student all the way through high school.

She did well, but it wasn't easy.

"It was a challenge," she recalls, "and I can remember coming home after school so exhausted from reading lips all day in the classroom, playing sports. I'd come home and take naps for hours and hours."

Mary Karol finally immersed herself in American Sign Language when she got to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), where she is a counselor today.

It was at NTID that she met Doug. He proposed to her on a diving trip, underwater, in sign language. When both of their children were born deaf, they made very different decisions about how to educate them than their parents did.

The Matchetts decided Scott and Kara should learn American Sign Language first and only later add English. Choosing their schools was harder.

Looming over every education decision the Matchetts make for their children is a disturbing statistic: A deaf American, 18 years old, graduating from high school, may be fluent in sign language, but is likely to read English at the 4th-grade level. Doing better than that is the key to succeeding in a hearing world.

But how?

When we met the Matchetts a year ago, they'd put Kara in public school. Why? Because for Kara, it's not: "You're on your own. Sink or swim," like it was for her parents, thanks to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act passed in 1975. The law mandates that states must provide sufficient resources so that disabled students have full access to public education.

Kara has an interpreter with her in class at all times and a language pathologist. Today, more than 60 percent of all deaf students in the U.S. spend part or all of their day in public school classrooms alongside hearing students.

Explains Mary Karol, "If you throw Kara in the water, she'll swim quickly. But for Scott, it takes more time. So their timing is different. So for her, she's comfortable in an environment where she's different."

Scott, less so. He was sent to the Rochester School for the Deaf. One way or another, the states pay for deaf education, as much as \$70,000 a year. But today, only about a quarter of all deaf children attend deaf schools. Many have closed.

On any given school day, Kara and Scott might find themselves having the same kind of one-on-one speech therapy and language training. But, when Kara is with the other students - for example, in her Brownie troop - she finds herself in an environment very much like the world she'll face as an adult, where she is the only one who is deaf. Perhaps because it's Rochester, though, the Brownies are learning to sign.

Scott, meanwhile, is surrounded by deaf children to make friends with, and deaf adults who can build his confidence and serve as role models. They communicate easily and directly in sign language, without an interpreter.

The Matchetts see their children's deafness in the mirror of their own lives. And, as they see life come full circle, they pray it will come around more gently this time. But how to beat those statistics is a tough call.

Says Mary Karol, "They can always come home and feel safe here. This'll be their comfort zone. They can come home and turn their voices off and sign."

Sounds Of Silence shown Sunday, January 13, 2002

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