

Three RIT College of Science professors learn ASL

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American Sign Language program--an unforgettable experience by Marcia Birken, professor; Carol Marchetti, assistant professor; and Eileen Marron, assistant dean--College of Science

Last spring we all signed up for the month-long Provost Summer American Sign Language and Deaf Culture Experience for the same reason--to communicate with the ever-increasing population of deaf students in the College of Science. We gave up most of the month of June to become better communicators in what we thought would be a straightforward educational endeavor.

Marcia Birken

We didn't experience what we expected. We didn't know that our teachers would communicate to us only in sign language; that we would be immersed in a culture very different from any we knew; and that we would experience daily frustration. We believe that our ignorance going into the course was good because if we had known these things before, we might not have embarked on the adventure, missing a profound and positive experience.

Carol Marchetti

Classes began with some awkward finger spelling and signing, but a large part of our first week passed in a blur of missing what was going on. We learned that a positive attitude mattered in this experience. If we focused on our embarrassment at forgetting the previous day's signs or we gave into frustration at missed words, then we lost the thread of what was going on in class. As teachers, we were used to being in control of the classroom, not this role reversal where we felt confusion and sometimes panic.

Eileen Marron

Our teachers, Barbara Ray Holcomb and Sam Holcomb, and their two teaching assistants used patience and humor to keep us from fleeing. Over and over they taught us the same words, the same concepts, the same American Sign Language (ASL). They taught us to drop our defenses and to have fun. We wondered if we had ever been so patient with our own students.

By the third week we started to lose our inhibitions and began to express our feelings with our hands and faces. We had lectures by experts on deaf culture, talks by faculty and students on their personal histories of growing up deaf in a hearing world, and opportunities to roam the NTID building and try out our new skills.

We became a bit overconfident in our safe ASL classroom environment--the teachers could always figure out what we were trying to sign, so we were unprepared for how difficult new encounters could be. Eating at a table with people we didn't know knocked our self-assurance back to a reality level. Deaf students tried to engage us in normal lunchtime ASL conversation. At first we froze, but with some gentle coaxing and a lot of patience on their part, we did communicate our thoughts. We were not fluent, sometimes we felt terribly incoherent, but our ability to communicate was growing. Our new skills made it possible to attempt conversations that would have been impossible prior to the course.

Finally it was week four--our week of "eld trips. We went to Marketplace Mall, the Seneca Park Zoo and Genesee Country Museum, where the class committed to communicating without voice. This meant using sign language among our classmates and miming or writing to people we met on these field trips. For the first time we felt what it was like to be "the other" in a larger society.

We heard and observed the people around us as we signed in our groups--from the store clerk who told her co-worker not to waste time with us to the mall security guard who followed us closely. But none of this could diminish the camaraderie we had developed with our teachers and fellow students.

In addition to becoming better communicators, we learned about deaf culture, discussed issues of deaf/hearing families and had our first opportunity to interact with colleagues at NTID. And, we achieved our original goal--better communication with our students.

We may not know all of the vocabulary, but we have a new awareness of the deaf community and the confidence to try our new ASL skills. We gave up many days of leisure last June, but what we gained was a priceless education.

For more information about the program, contact Barbara Ray Holcomb at brhncm@rit.edu.