

CBS News Sunday Morning - Sign City Part One



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Sign City

In Rochester, New York, Some Deaf Citizens Find Haven

(CBS) In Rochester, N.Y., Starbuck's offers its employees free courses in American Sign Language.

And, at the Council Rock Elementary School, first graders say and sign the Pledge of Allegiance.

Welcome to Rochester, population 350,000, home of Xerox, Kodak, and the nation's largest per capita deaf community. CBS News Sunday Morning Correspondent Martha Teichner reports.

Wherever you look, there are signs of a culture within a culture. It is the very visible intersection of the two that makes Rochester unique.

For example, it's no surprise that the deaf community has its own newspaper. But how many big daily papers have a reporter specifically assigned to the deaf beat? The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle does.

Dr. Carolyn Stern, a family physician, moved to Rochester from Chicago two years ago to open what she believes is the only medical practice in the U.S. specifically for the deaf. She herself is deaf, but you'd hardly know it.

People say Rochester is probably the most deaf-friendly city anywhere. What Did Dr. Stern find when you moved there?

"It was a little bit of culture shock," says Dr. Stern. "I would go into a gas station and ask for directions, and somebody would start signing to me... That never happens in Chicago."

How deaf is she?

"Like wood," says the doctor. "I don't hear anything without my implant on."

Every morning, Dr. Stern attaches a microphone to the magnetic transmitter surgically implanted behind her ear. Cochlear implants are controversial among the deaf, but having one enables Dr. Stern to do what would appear to be the impossible: Use a stethoscope.

Her office looks like any other doctor's, except that just about everyone signs. The deaf can't pick up a phone and make an appointment or explain a problem, so there is a TTY (a Telephone/Teletype Machine).

If Dr. Stern has to phone another doctor or a hearing patient (yes, she has hearing patients), she has a full-time interpreter signing to her what's being said. Just as most cities have temporary help agencies, Rochester has agencies that supply interpreters for the deaf.

So how did Rochester get to be, in effect, the deaf capital of the U.S.? Probably the best answer is because of language; specifically, the evolution of American Sign Language.

The story starts at the Rochester School for the Deaf. For a long time after the school was founded in 1876, it was standard practice to try to teach deaf children to speak and lip read as if they were hearing.

For more than 100 years, until the mid 1970s, the closest thing to sign language permitted anywhere on campus was a tedious method of finger-spelling English; in other words, English on the hands. It was actually called "the Rochester method." The prevailing assumption -- not just in Rochester, but throughout the U.S. -- was that success meant bringing the deaf into the hearing world.

Teaching the deaf to speak and lip read is difficult. Educators were afraid that if sign language were allowed, learning English would be even harder, and the deaf wouldn't be as motivated. So, it was banned in many deaf schools. But in social circles and deaf clubs, American Sign Language (ASL) was becoming the language of choice, spreading almost like an underground movement.

Actually, ASL came from France, but evolved in the United States, its vocabulary vivid and full of visual imagery.

According to noted deaf actor and poet Patrick Graybill, "There's such a richness to it, and there are so many ways to play with signs. In English, if you're speaking, you have one mouth. But we have two hands, and you can use both hands to sign something at the same time."

It was no coincidence that efforts to make ASL mainstream coincided with the civil rights era. Getting it recognized as a real language was like a national liberation struggle for deaf culture, with huge implications for Rochester.

There were also huge implications for Karen Christie. Like so many other deaf Americans before ASL was widely accepted, Karen Christie was expected to sink or swim in public schools and didn't learn sign language until college.

"For me, really, it is like I grew up as a hearing person who just couldn't, quote, hear," she says. "I didn't even know the meaning of 'deaf,' because growing up, I never really saw deaf people."

How did her life change? What did she do differently when she learned the freedom of sign language and got acquainted with deaf culture?

"Well, one thing it really impacted was my professional life. Meaning, I could become a teacher. Before, I didn't know that," she replies. "The thought of trying to communicate with my voice and listening to a classroom felt impossible. But here, with deaf students, I can become a teacher. So I saw my professional opportunities open up. I saw what I could do, not what I was limited by."

Karen Christie is an English professor at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). There, ASL is spoken, not English.

NTID was created by an act of Congress. It is the only technical college for the deaf in the U.S. It opened in 1968, right about the time ASL really came into its own. At NTID, there are 1,200 students, plus faculty and support staff, all signing to each other, in class and out.

It's part of the Rochester Institute of Technology, which means that deaf students are automatically assigned interpreters and note-takers so they can take classes alongside hearing students in any department.

NTID has been a magnet, drawing deaf students to Rochester - students who often stay on. It is the nucleus of a community that exists within the comfort zone of American Sign Language.

Karen Christie's encounters with the hearing world can be like trips to a foreign country. She often feels frustrated and lonely, even in Rochester. But because it is Rochester, there is that parallel world, where the deaf can speak freely and be understood.

They have each other, in a place where language has liberated them.

Sounds of Silence

<http://www.cbsnews.com/now/story/0,1597,309589-412,00.shtml>

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