

Alice Benedict Beardsley Remembered

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by Kathryn L. Schmitz

Alice Benedict Beardsley, known as NTID's first interpreter, died May 12, 1997, after a long illness. Beardsley was an integral part of the NTID community from the very beginning, serving as the interpreter for the site-visit team in 1965 which selected RIT as the host institution for the newly created National Technical Institute for the Deaf. She later was officially employed as an interpreter to work in the classrooms with the first NTID class in 1968.

"She proceeded to become a role model both for the deaf students whom she served, but also hearing students who were drawn into the field of interpreting by her influence," says Joseph Avery, professor in NTID's American Sign Language and Educational Interpreting Department. "Not only could deaf students understand her more easily than other interpreters, they sensed a special kinship with her because of a shared background of school experience and deafness. Deaf faculty and staff were equally pleased when Alice was the interpreter for business meetings or social occasions."

Beardsley was born in Corning, New York in 1922. At age 5, she lost much of her hearing to illness. It was not until three years later that she was diagnosed with a hearing loss and was admitted to the Rochester School for the Deaf, where she was nurtured and educated from the ages of 9 to 18 years.

In 1964, she had middle-ear surgery which restored much of the hearing in one ear. She was able to provide community interpreting for deaf people during this period, a time when interpreting was provided free of charge. Her reputation as an interpreter was so good that she was the natural choice to interpret for the on-site visit team. For this assignment, she was paid for the first time for her interpreting services.

Beardsley's hearing began to diminish again, and in 1974 she became a trainer of interpreters in NTID's Basic Interpreter Training Program (now an associate degree program in educational interpreting), renowned for teaching fingerspelling. Throughout these years, Beardsley continued in the role of special interpreter for Dr. William Castle, former director of NTID, during special occasions when he recognized faculty for length of service and other achievements.

Beardsley became politically active in the Deaf community in 1947, when she joined the Rochester Civic Association of the Deaf (RCAD), a branch of the Empire State Association of the Deaf (ESAD), an affiliate of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). In 1948, she was elected to the board of RCAD, then in the 1950s she progressed in leadership from secretary, to vice-president, then finally president in 1958. In 1962, Beardsley was appointed chair of the state ESAD convention, while still president of RCAD. She was elected secretary of ESAD that year, and took on that responsibility while

completing her term as president of RCAD. She was secretary of ESAD for four years.

In 1965, in Syracuse, site of the first Empire State Association of the Deaf Convention 100 years earlier in 1865, Beardsley became the first elected woman president of the association. She was reelected for two more terms, serving a total of six years as president. Subsequently, she served the association again as board member and secretary/treasurer. In 1978, she was named chairperson of the NAD convention held in Rochester, working closely with Dr. T. Alan Hurwitz, director of the Northeast Technical Assistance Center.

She retired from NTID in 1988, but continued to make guest appearances as Dr. Castle's interpreter and to make presentations to interpreting students. She received the Outstanding Service Award from NTID's National Advisory Group in 1989. As her health began to fail, she was moved into a nursing facility in 1992, where she died. She is survived by two daughters, Vicky and Valerie; her husband, Bob, whom she met at RSD, is deceased.