

Making History: A Black Man's Hands Speak Eloquenty

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When Brian Jenerson was a child, he was fascinated by the way his grandmother communicated through sign language. She had lost much of her hearing as a child and taught her family how to use their hands in place of their voices.

"I remember watching my mother communicate with her," Mr. Jenerson said. "I'd look and wonder what they were doing. There would be smiles and laughter. I was totally enthralled."

In his mid-30's, he decided to turn his childhood fascination into a career. He enrolled at a college here to become a sign language interpreter, and to his surprise, other students became fascinated with him. "Black deaf students would hug me, shake my hand," he said.

That is because so few minority students enter the field of American Sign Language interpreting. In fact, Mr. Jenerson, who graduated today from the interpreting program at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, a college at Rochester Institute of Technology, was the first black man to do so. Thirteen black women have graduated.

Two to 5 percent of sign language interpreters around the country are black, Hispanic or members of other minorities, according to colleges and a national registry. By comparison, 48 percent of the deaf population are in that category, according to El Paso Community College, which has a track record of recruiting many Hispanic students to its sign language interpreting program.

Experts say the lack of minority interpreters means that more of the message, like slang or idioms, is lost between cultures.

"If a person doesn't share the same background the nuances may be lost," said Mark Alan Morrison, the only black man certified as an interpreter in New Jersey. "I've seen people who thought they were matching affect, and using colloquialisms. They were trying to 'get down with the person,' and it can be insulting."

The misinterpretations can have serious consequences, he said. As a specialist in legal interpreting, he sees a "great number" of minority defendants pass through the legal system. Some are deaf, and some may be misunderstood in their legal proceedings. "There's bound to be miscommunications," he said. "If it's murder, it's serious."

Then there is the comfort factor. "It's easier to talk to a person who looks like you," said Karen Black, a spokeswoman for the Rochester interpreting program.

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, based in Alexandria, VA., has a committee that encourages minority interpreters into leadership roles. "The hope is that by being in those leadership roles, other minorities will see that and want to join the profession," said Joe Patton, a spokesman for the organization.

Of the registry's 10,000 members, nearly 90 percent are white women.

Several organizations for black interpreters and minority deaf groups are also trying to address the problem.

"I think there's a lack of information in the minority community about sign language, and there aren't many role models," said Jackie Bruce, president of the National Alliance of Black Interpreters. Education experts blame everything from the profession's low salaries (beginners earn in the mid-20's), to the perception that interpreting sign language is not masculine.

In Rochester, the interpreting program uses federal grant money to recruit interpreters. But it does not specifically seek out blacks and Hispanics. "We just want quality interpreters," said Ms. Black.

Mr. Jenerson did not know he would one day make history when he first became interested in sign language.

As a child, his first signed word was “mine” – an important one for a boy with eight sisters and four brothers. He learned enough signs to take shopping lists from his mother, who wanted him to practice, and to curse his brothers, who did not. But it was just for fun.

As an adult, he worked as an X-ray technician and a dance instructor. “You can’t dance forever,” said Mr. Jenerson, 39.

He went looking for a new career, and remembered his grandmother’s sign language. “I never forgot it,” he said. “It had a special place in my heart.”

Little did he know that his hometown, Rochester, has the largest deaf population per capita in the nation, and one of the best schools for interpreters.

The city’s deaf population is 6,770, or approximately 0.68 percent of the population, according to a 1997 study by the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. Nationally, some .47 percent of the population is deaf. Many deaf people were drawn to Rochester by the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, established in 1968.

While there are 300 sign language interpreters in Rochester, only 10 are black and just one is black man, reflecting the national situation.

Mr. Jenerson took introductory courses in 1998. He entered interpreter training in 1999, and found he loved and was challenged by American Sign Language even more as an adult.

“When a deaf person is signing to you, you don’t see individual signs,” he said. “You see a picture. And the characters in the picture are moving, and it’s like watching a movie. And when you’re in that zone and you can see the picture, there are colors to it, and the characters are moving and you’re looking at the deaf person, you’re looking at their eyes and you can see emotions in there. It’s a whole new world.”

Six months ago, Mr. Jenerson began studying the class pictures of graduates. It dawned on him that he did not see any black men. Suddenly all those hugs and smiles from black deaf students made sense. “It explained a lot of things,” he said. “Suddenly I learned why I’m treated different. People are fascinated.”