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National Documentary Has NTID Connections

March 16, 2007

“Through Deaf Eyes,” a two-hour documentary to be broadcast at 9 p.m. ET, March 21 on PBS, explores nearly 200 years of deaf life in America. The film presents the shared experiences of American history—family life, education, work, and community connections—from the perspective of deaf citizens.



Several professionals affiliated with Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf have been involved with the production.

Professor Harry Lang served as the senior advisor to the film project. He was involved in project planning, reviewed all film transcripts and three versions of the film during editing. He is also interviewed in the film in one of his many areas of expertise in deaf history: The invention of the teletype machine (TTY).

Paul Taylor is a retired associate professor of Applied Computer Technology at NTID. He is interviewed in the film during the TTY section. His wife, Sally Taylor, who worked as a staff and faculty member at RIT/NTID before recently retiring is also interviewed. The Taylors were instrumental in setting up the earliest TTY in St. Louis, Missouri.

In his interview, Patrick Graybill, retired associate professor, discusses his experiences at a deaf residential school, and his role as an actor with the National Theater of the Deaf. Archival footage of Graybill in the National Theater for the Deaf play “My Third Eye” is included in the film.

Professor Emeritus Robert Panara, who was NTID's first deaf professor, tells an engaging story about his father's attempts to cure his deafness. Archival footage of Panara teaching English literature in the 1950s is used to illustrate the early linguistic study of ASL.

An NTID graduate, Kevin Nolan discusses a physician's response to the birth of his third child, and tells a compelling story about his struggles, as a teenager in a mainstream setting, to ask a hearing girl out on a date.

Filmmakers and RIT graduates whose works are included in the documentary include Wayne Betts Jr., Adrean Mangiardi and Tracey Salaway. These and other works introduce a deaf frame of reference behind the documentary camera. To most people, “deaf” means to not hear. To deaf people and these deaf filmmakers, it means much more.

“Through Deaf Eyes” does not approach the topic of deaf history from the perspective of sentimentality or of overcoming the inability to hear, nor does it deny the physical reality of being deaf. The documentary takes a straight-forward look at life for people who are part of the cultural-linguistic group who use American Sign Language and often define themselves as “Deaf” - with a capital, and cultural, “D” - and deaf people who, for a variety of reasons, do not identify with the Deaf cultural community. The history often shows that intersections between deaf and Deaf people are many and that oppression and discrimination are common experiences.

Technology also played a hand in social change for deaf people. The invention of TTYs that could communicate across phone lines made it possible for deaf people to have telephone access to each other. Captioning provided new access to information such as the evening news. Technology also created controversy. “Through Deaf Eyes” explores the issues surrounding cochlear implants, now used by more deaf children and adults than ever before. The film presents frank conversations with deaf people who use cochlear implants and those who do not, and with parents who often struggle to make the best decisions for their deaf child.

A film by Lawrence R. Hott and Diane Garey, “Through Deaf Eyes” is produced by Florentine Films/Hott Productions Inc. and WETA. Major funding for “Through Deaf Eyes” is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, PBS, The Annenberg Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. The outreach campaign is funded, in part, by Sign Language Associates, Inc. and Richard and Gail Eden. Outreach partners are the National Association of the Deaf, Gallaudet University, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, and California State University-Northridge. As part of the outreach campaign, numerous organizations, some in association with their local public television stations, will mount events and discussions exploring the issues raised in the film.

Rochester Institute of Technology

National Technical Institute for the Deaf

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