Deaf Culture Note # 4

**Ways of Communicating with Others**

As you learn sign, you might bump into a Deaf person at work, school, or on the street. Let them know that you sign. If the setting is appropriate and the Deaf person has time, they will be happy to chat with you. If they are in a hurry, the person might excuse himself or herself. In any case, it is important to let the Deaf person be in the lead in setting the communication mode.

Here are strategies Deaf people might use to communicate with you.

**Signing.** Deaf people are very encouraging of new signers and will be patient with your signing skills. If the conversation is stalling, the Deaf person may switch to another strategy to help along the communication.

**Gestures.** If signing in ASL doesn’t work, the Deaf person may use easily understood gestures such as pointing or acting out things to get their message across.

**Writing or typing.** This strategy is a sure and clear way to convey a message. When communicating with someone they know, a Deaf person can use email or instant messaging. For “face-to-face” communication messages can be typed out on a phone and shown to the hearing person, or if needed, notes can be written back and forth on a piece of paper.

**Third person.** In casual settings, a Deaf person may ask a hearing friend who signs to relay information for them. *This is different from a formal interpreter.*

**Lipreading and speech.** A very small percentage of Deaf people use this strategy. When it is used, it is usually for predictable, limited exchanges of information. For most Deaf people, however, this strategy is not preferred, since it often leads easily to misunderstandings.

Regardless of the strategy, the goal is to communicate. These are the things that you need to remember to do to as a new signers:

* Let the Deaf person know you sign
* Avoid spoken English or using voice without relaying information in ASL
* Let the Deaf person set the communication mode

<Signing Naturally>

As we begin to develop our ASL vocabulary, you may work up the courage to communicate with Deaf people in the near future. Here are some strategies for confirming information and asking for clarification.

1. Avoid overusing AGAIN and SLOW-DOWN: You can use the signs AGAIN and SLOW at the beginning of a conversation with Deaf people, but it should not be repeated after each statement you don’t understand. Just as hearing people don’t say to each other, “Again” or “Slow” when asking for clarification, that’s not how Deaf people sign to each other when they don’t understand.
2. When you catch some but not all the signs in a statement, repeat back what you think you understood to the signer with a questioning expression. This will show him/her not only that you need clarification, but it will also let the person know what you understood so that he or she does not need to repeat that part of the message.

Example 1: If the person signs,

SCHOOL I GO ----------- but you missed the actual name

Ask specifically for the name only

SCHOOL NAME WHAT - Don’t sign AGAIN.

Example 2: If the person signs,

MY FAMILY I HAVE \_\_\_ SISTERS \_\_\_ BROTHERS

How should you ask for the information you missed?

To confirm that you understood a statement or concept correctly, restate the message back to the signer with a questioning expression. This will allow the person the opportunity to confirm that you understood correctly or clarify parts you misunderstood.

Back to Example 2: You could confirm by signing,

SISTERS YOU HAVE 4 BROTHERS YOU HAVE 3 (with your y/n NMS)

1. **Don’t fake it!** Do not pretend you understand what a person is signing to you if you don’t really understand. This will only get you into trouble when the person you are conversing with realizes you don’t understand. Take the time to ask for clarification. Don’t worry about feeling foolish. They struggle to understand hearing people all the time and must ask for clarification – they understand that feeling! If you don’t get it, admit it. Let the person know you missed something or didn’t understand.