

# BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE DEAF CULTURE & HISTORY

## **Big “D” Versus Little “d”**

W. Joseph Garcia introduced the concept, which has stuck, that if referring to a person who is a member of the Deaf community, and is self-identified as culturally Deaf, the word will be capitalized to represent a culture. If only referring to the audiological state of deafness, the word is spelled with a lowercase “d.” Also, if referring to a person who is not culturally Deaf, but is audiological deaf, the word will be in lowercase letters. For example, many late-deafened or oral deaf do not associate with the culture and community of the Deaf; therefore, when describing them, the lowercase “d” would be used. It is an identity and one that each deaf person must decide for themselves. It has nothing to do with hearing ability. Many people, who, audiological, are considered hard of hearing, are strong supporters and active members of the Deaf community. Conversely, there are many totally deaf individuals who stay exclusively in the Hearing world and do not socialize with culturally Deaf individuals.

## **What is Hard of Hearing**

“Hard-of-hearing” can denote a person with a mild-to-moderate low hearing percentage since birth or those who had a hearing loss due the cause of illness or accident. When a person who is hard-of-hearing can also denote a person who doesn’t have/want any cultural affiliation with the Deaf community. Or both. The HOH dilemma: in some ways hearing, in some ways deaf, in others, neither. Can one be hard-of-hearing and ASL-Deaf? That’s possible, too. Can one be hard-of-hearing and function as hearing? Of course. What about being hard-of-hearing and functioning as a member of both the hearing and Deaf communities? That’s a delicate tightrope-balancing act, but it too is possible. As for the political dimension: HOH people can be allies of the Deaf community. They can choose to join or to ignore it. They can participate in the social, cultural, political, and legal life of the community along with culturally-Deaf or live their lives completely within the parameters of the “Hearing world.” But they may have a more difficult time establishing a satisfying cultural/social identity. Deaf Life, “For Hearing People Only” (October 1997).

## **What is the Deaf Community?**

A community is a group of people who share common interests and a common heritage just as many other own community people. Deaf community is one of it kind that comprised of individuals, both deaf and hearing, who to varying degrees embrace particular community goals that come from Deaf cultural influences. This topic card is presented from a Deaf cultural and community perspective. While this Deaf Community have a culture that is generally defined as a system of values, beliefs, and standards that guide a peoples' thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Deaf Culture is comprised of five areas, which are: identity, values, rules of social interaction, traditions & language.

## Sign Language in America

American Sign Language (ASL) in America (and in many parts of Canada) plays a central role - as all spoken languages do - in the context of understanding the culture of the people who use it to communicate. People who are Deaf throughout the world have developed unique and distinct forms of sign language for many generations; even regional dialects exist in geographically diverse areas within individual countries. Far from being a simple visual translation of English, American Sign Language is in fact the popular main language all of its own and is not a foreign language; it is formally recognized by many governmental and educational institutions as being the equivalent of any other foreign language. ASL is not the only Sign Language in America, English Sign Language (ESL) is another kind of language the Deaf and Hard of Hearing people also used to communicate. ASL had been most closely in long history related to French Sign Language (FSL). It has been proposed that ASL is a creole language, although ASL shows features atypical of creole languages, such as agglutinative morphology. ASL originated in the early 19th century in the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in Hartford, Connecticut, from a situation of language contact, which is why ASL is not a foreign language. While, ASL should be well formally known as one of the legal recognition languages in America.

## Getting Attention or Involved in the Deaf Community

**DO:** Sign Language depends on vision. To begin a conversation you must first make eye contact with the person you want to sign to. If this person is not looking at you, you can try waving to catch his/her eye.

**DON'T:** When you wave in this way, don't wave in the person's face or use huge waving gestures if you are close by. A small flapping movement of the hand is usually enough. As your tutor will demonstrate.

**DO:** If waving fails and if you are near enough, you can tap the person's shoulder. Do not feel hesitant about this tapping, even with strangers; Deaf community members are used to such contact.

**DON'T:** When touching a person to get attention don't tap too lightly or just once, or too often. Two or three firm but not heavy taps should be enough. Shoulders are the best places to tap, until you know the person well! Remember, if you can get attention with a wave, there is no need to tap.

**DO:** If the person you want to sign to is at a distance, ask other people to pass on your wave or tap until you get this person's attention.

**Be aware of your facial expressions when you're with the Deaf people, they can read body language. The body and face expressions speak louder and more honestly than your speaking words.**

## **DO & Don't**

### **DO:**

- Establish eye contact before beginning communication. This is considered a stare in other cultures but not in Deaf culture.
- It's okay to lightly banging (vibrations) the table or floor to get the Deaf person's attention before communicating.
- Switch lights on and off to get the attention before communicating.
- If communicating with someone Deaf who can lip read, speak with normal tone but slowly and clear.
- Writing a notes to communicate dose help.
- If possible, include the Deaf person in the conversation when a hearing person joins. No one likes to be left out.
- Help the Deaf person to feel comfortable during social gatherings. Introduce them to your hearing friends.

### **DON'T:**

- Don't stare!
- Don't refer to the Deaf as “deaf & dumb”, “deaf-mute's” or “Hearing Impaired”.
- Don't insist that the Deaf person try and talk.
- Don't throw things to get their attention, it is rude!
- Don't block the Deaf person's vision, the Deaf person wouldn't be able see what is going on or who is talking.
- Don't place your hands in front of your face or lips when communicating with the Deaf.
- Don't turn away from the Deaf person when communicating.
- Don't and never dismissive them: "Never mind", "It's nothing", "Forget it", "I will tell you later", "It's not important" are attitudes that most Deaf people most hate what they said that.

- Don't talk down to the Deaf person. Don't be paternalistic and assume you know what Deaf people need or want.
- Don't assume they are behaving oddly, after all they are individuals communicate visually and physically rather than audibly.
- Don't talk such secrets and/or talk behind the Deaf person's back. Deaf people can sense when a person are talking about him or her.
- Don't persist in helping the Deaf, IF it is not needed. Help, Yes! Embarrass, NO!
- Don't yell or exaggerate mouthing or mock sign language or make obscene gestures which is offensive
- Don't become discouraged if you have difficulty learning sign language well. Don't be afraid to ask the a Deaf person to sign slowly, just as you must talk slowly when speaking.
- Don't complain if a Deaf person needs your assistance with a phone call.
- Don't forget about deaf people at meetings. They can "take an active part"!