

Crossed Signals / Crossed Signs

STORY TRANSCRIPT

AK: Crossed Signals & Miscommunication

November 24, 2007

REBECCA SHEIR, HOST: Welcome back to AK. I'm Rebecca Sheir, and today we're talking about Crossed Signals and Miscommunication.

Earlier in the show, we heard about a public radio station where something kind of odd happened, and as a result, when they tried playing any national programming, all they got was silence.

But silence is what roughly 300 people in the state experience every day, all day. Roughly .04 percent of Alaska's population is deaf. Another 10 to 12 percent is hard of hearing.

And, if any of these individuals have been in school during the last 35 years, some of them may have spent time here...

[Fade up sound of preschool classroom: children calling out, playing with toys, moving around chairs.]

...The Alaska State School for Deaf and Hard of Hearing. 52 students are currently enrolled at ASSDHH, which shares buildings with three schools in the Anchorage School District: Russian Jack Elementary, Hanshew Middle and East High.

[Continue sound of preschool classroom.]

Most of the classes at ASSDHH are self-contained. But with the preschoolers at Russian Jack, deaf, hard-of-hearing and hearing students all come together to play, explore and learn.

ANNA MAYRA: One of the great things that this preschool, this bilingual community provides...

This is Anna Mayra.

ANNA MAYRA: ...is a bridge between a child's two languages in their home.

She's been teaching preschool at ASSDHH since 1981.

ANNA MAYRA: So if they have a deaf parent, they may not have all the English equivalents to the signs.

That's "signs" as in sign language: American Sign Language or ASL.

ANNA MAYRA: And that's what we do is try to build that bridge, because we understand their world.

[Sound of classroom continues.]

ANNA MAYRA: Hi, what's your name?

JADEN: Um...

ANNA MAYRA: He's signing a J and curving it. Now say your name.

JADEN: Jaden!

ANNA MAYRA: Jaden!

Jaden is hearing, but has two people in his family who are deaf.

JADEN: Yep, deaf.

ANNA MAYRA: he has a stepdad who's deaf and a baby sister, too!

JADEN: Yeah!

ANNA MAYRA: Yeah - so Jaden's gonna be a great big brother because he's gonna be signing to his baby sister.

JADEN: Yeah!

Another student in the class...

ANNA MAYRA: Come here, Curtis! Come over here!

...is Curtis.

ANNA MAYRA: Say hi.

CURTIS: Hi.

ANNA MAYRA: Hi. Say hi

CURTIS: (louder) Hi.

ANNA MAYRA: (laughs)]

Curtis is mostly deaf; he's among several children in the class with a hearing aid.

ANNA MAYRA: He is in a hearing household that uses sign language, and he's learning both languages because he can hear a little bit.

[Fade down sound of preschool classroom.]

DAISY CARTWRIGHT: I personally believe, and professionally believe as well...

ASSDHH school counselor Daisy Cartwright was born deaf, the fifth generation on her mother's side. The voice you're hearing in the background belongs to interpreter Tracy Pifer.

DAISY CARTWRIGHT: ...that everyone, whether the child is deaf or hard of hearing, should be given an opportunity to learn all the different communication modes that are available. whether it's signing, finger spelling, speech, auditory, wear your hearing aid, um, visual aids. give them as much as possible, because each individual will then have to choose for themselves what they feel comfortable with.

[Fade up sound of espresso shop: customers chatting and laughing, soft music, espresso grinder grinding away]

Someone who wasn't able to choose for herself -- not at first, anyway -- is Shana Gibbs.

SHANA GIBBS: My name is Shana Gibbs and I am a deaf individual. I live here in Anchorage, Alaska.

The voice you're hearing, by the way, is that of Rachel Hollander, an interpreter.

SHANA GIBBS: I was born deaf.

I met up with Shana and Rachel at an espresso shop in Anchorage.

SHANA GIBBS: Profoundly, bilaterally, meaning both ears, deaf.

Today, Shana's a behavioral case manager at the Arc of Anchorage, a non-profit serving people with developmental disabilities, behavioral health issues, or deafness. Growing up in New York, Shana didn't go to a school like ASSDHH. She was in a mainstream school.

SHANA GIBBS: (overlapping with host's "in a mainstream school") I was in a mainstream school, which means I was socialized fully with hearing students, but I had an interpreter in the classroom.

School requirements dictated that Shana wear this big, bulky, somewhat primitive listening device around her neck. They also required that she read aloud in class.

SHANA GIBBS: During that time, I really did not like that experience, but I had no choice.

But in college, Shana did have a choice. At the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, she was with deaf people all day. She got rid of her hearing aids, and no

longer felt compelled to speak. Today, when she's interacting with a hearing person -- ordering a half-caf double latte with extra foam, say -- and no interpreter is present, she'll choose her communication approach depending on her surroundings.

SHANA GIBBS: If it's really packed, I'll write my order. 'Cause it's easier than trying to speak -- don't understand me, don't understand me -- people behind me are starting to get annoyed. The line's getting longer. I don't want that experience.

Which isn't to say that Shana isn't proud of who she is. People may stare, people may misunderstand, people may find out she's deaf and freeze like a deer in headlights - these things happen to her every day, she says. But what's most important to Shana is her culture... her deaf culture.

SHANA GIBBS: I'm comfortable with who I am. Like, if I have two pills -- the red pill and the blue pill -- and if I take one, I could be hearing, and if I take the other one, I lose a leg. I would choose to lose my leg, because to get my hearing, I think I would lose some of my identity of who I am, and who I've been, as a person.

And for so many people in the deaf community, that identity means the world to them... more than words can say.

For more information on deaf resources in Alaska, visit our website: akradio.org