The Life of a Sign Language Therapist

Growing up, have you ever wondered what it would be like to learn a different language? Maybe you wanted to learn Spanish, German, or Mandarin? You may have even wondered what it would be like to learn sign language. For some people, this dream is a reality and there are many people who make careers out of their bilingual skills. We decided to talk to Autumn, a sign language therapist, about her day to day life.

**Echo & Bronwyn:** When did you first become interested in sign language?

**Autumn:** I first became interested in sign language around 18 years ago when I was a senior in high school. I knew I wanted to do something with Special Ed and my boyfriend’s mom wrote braille at the time. Since she did braille and I wanted to teach, I decided to teach deaf children.

**E&B:** Why did you choose to teach?

**A:** I chose to teach deaf children because my boyfriend’s mom did braille. I also always knew I wanted to become a teacher in some way.

**E&B:** What schooling was required before you could start teaching at the School for Deaf?

**A:** I have to have a 4 year degree in deaf education. The only two places in Illinois that you can get this degree is in Jacksonville and Bloomington. Other states have 4 year degree program and then the 4 year deaf education as requirements. If I were to go to Michigan, I would not be able to get a job right away because I would have to go through more training.

**E&B:** What is the hardest part about sign language?

**A:** I think the hardest part is that it is a conceptually based language. It’s also more visual than other languages. For example, when you sign the word running, it could be running nose, running a race, running water, or even a running hose.

**E&B:** Is there many different ways to use/speak it just like in the English language?

**A:** I think that it's exactly like the English language. It has grammar and everything and specific hand shapes with it. You can change the meaning of the sign. For example, you could have your palm facing up and then face it down and it would be two completely different words.

**E&B:** Would you say that sign language is something that anyone/everyone could benefit from using?

**A:** I think everyone needs to know it because it’s a natural language for deaf people. It’s convenient and you never know when you will meet someone who is deaf. You could be working somewhere like McDonalds and you would need to be able to sign if a deaf person came in and was ordering.

**E&B:** Do you use sign language in every conversation you have, or just when you’re using it to communicate with others that know it?

**A:** I only use it in specific conversations around people that may be deaf. Sometimes I have to respect family's choice and not sign around their kids if that is what they want. Normally, I sign a lot with kids especially if they don't know how to talk yet.

**E&B:** Has you using sign language ever confused someone or started up a conversation?

**A:** Yes, normally when it happens it's almost like a zoo. People just sit and stare at is. Most of the time people don't ask much though. Occasionally, people will say something like “I use sign language to talk to my deaf cousin or my grandpa had to use sign language.”

**E&B:** Do most people that sign also learn to read lips?

**A:** It's more of an individual thing. I struggle with reading lips and a friend of mine can lip read perfect. I think it’s almost the same as with math or reading -- either you can do it or you can’t. I don’t think that lip reading actually has anything to do with if someone is hearing or deaf.

**E&B:** Was teaching sign language your first career choice?

**A:** It was kind of a first choice because I wanted to be a teacher and kind of fell into teaching deaf children. I loved teaching math and was originally with high school students, but moved to elementary. I enjoyed working with the younger kids a lot more. While I was teaching there, this job became available and I took it. When teaching the elementary students, I taught some sign language.