

Opening up worlds for the deaf

Ernst Lamothe Jr. 12 a.m. EDT June 13, 2014



(Photo: SHAWN
DOWD/@sdowdphoto/STAFF
PHOTOgrapher)

Davin Searls and David Justice were two men in their 20s trying to make a difference in China. They met while they were each doing separate adventures helping out the deaf community and teaching English at a university.

They formed a friendship, and when they both got back home, they had a plan. Both had different paths that brought them to the same place today, as co-founders of Discovering Deaf Worlds.

Founded in December 2006, Discovering Deaf Worlds is dedicated to creating a world that recognizes the abilities of deaf and hard-of-hearing people in developing countries and helping them acquire an education, maintain a job, raise a family and live autonomously. The nonprofit group focuses on management training to deaf advocacy organizations in developing countries.

All projects aim to improve standards of deaf education, communication accessibility, employment opportunities and human rights. In addition, the organization researches and promotes pressing issues and success stories of deaf people around the world. It is in more than a dozen countries, including Australia, China, India, Nepal and the Philippines, where Searls and Justice are right now.

"You learn so much when you can go to various countries and listen and understand the issues that the deaf community are facing," said Searls, a Pittsford native and executive director of the organization. "We are here to fill in the gaps and try to identify and solve some of the issues that are very clear in so many other countries."

For Searls, the cause is deeply personal. He comes from an all-deaf family, which includes both parents and a younger sister. He said his parents always showed him that he had the ability to do anything and to not let anyone tell him that his deafness would become a liability. And he wanted to make sure that others understood the same thing.

"In my family, I have been surrounded by deaf professionals like lawyers and accountants. I have always known that you could do anything if you were focused, and that being deaf wasn't going to keep me from anything I wanted," added Searls, 29.

As executive director of DDW, he serves as the liaison between board and staff members while also overseeing and authorizing overall management and operations. In the first year, he served as one of the primary board of directors as the organization was getting up and running. He slowly networked with numerous deaf schools and associations in five countries on behalf of Discovering Deaf World. Before the organization began, his advocacy started at Sarah Lawrence College where he chaired a disability engagement group that successfully lobbied for hiring a director of disability services.

Working with deaf people throughout the world, Justice also understood that deaf people were capable of doing anything. The problem was that too often others told them the opposite. That is the reason why he believes an organization like theirs is essential.

"In these other countries, people see being deaf as a family curse or bad karma. They tell people that if you have a deaf child, you are being punished for something you did in the past," added Justice, 35 of Rochester, who serves as the international programs director. "They are considered a burden in society and are not uplifted in any way."

A native of Rochester, Justice understood the city's ability to embrace the deaf community and offer so many services. He has networked with more than 250 deaf schools and associations in 50 countries on behalf of the organization. He first learned American Sign Language in 2000 and quickly became involved with the deaf community. He has served as a counselor for the Aspen Camp School for the Deaf, worked on language development research for the Colorado Home Intervention Program, and established a supportive employment service center for the Southwest Washington Center of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Justice believes that the power of education is an essential tool to eliminating ignorance and strives to be an intermediary of cultural understanding between deaf and hearing worlds. "Going into these countries, we saw that there was a lack of education for deaf people that they were really yearning. There are so many potential leaders out there," said Justice. "We are always motivated and passionate to get to work."

Both men say they have seen examples of deaf children being forced to stay inside the house because of the family's embarrassment. Sometimes before they can teach students, they have to build up their confidence. They have to erase the words that the students have heard for years.

"We tell them they can become leaders, and they can be role models to others," said Searls.

In the coming years, they have several plans for the organization. They want to expand to new countries, using the same successful model they have incorporated for nearly a decade. Seals said having the solid foundation and supportive and knowledgeable board members was the key to overcoming any early challenge.

"We were also fortunate to start it in Rochester," said Searls. "There are so many resources here that made it easier for us to start up. We are thankful for that, and sometimes we wish that deaf people in these other developing countries had a chance to grow up here and realize the benefit of a good community."

Lamothe is a freelance writer from Rochester.

Get to know Davin Searls and David Justice

- In his spare time, Justice enjoys going to the Adirondacks in upstate New York for a good hike, kayak, or bike ride.
- Searls taught teaching English and American Sign Language to young children and adults for five years.
- They have helped more than 300 deaf students.

Read or Share this story: <http://on.rocne.ws/1hOLjvK>



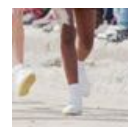
MORE STORIES



Value of Sandra Lee's home up 29 percent

[\(/story/news/2014/06/12/sandra-lee-andrew-cuomo-rob-astorino-property-taxes/10397409/\)](http://story/news/2014/06/12/sandra-lee-andrew-cuomo-rob-astorino-property-taxes/10397409/)
[\(/story/news/2014/06/12/sandra-lee-andrew-cuomo-rob-astorino-property-taxes/10397409/\)](http://story/news/2014/06/12/sandra-lee-andrew-cuomo-rob-astorino-property-taxes/10397409/)

June 12, 2014, 11:12 p.m.



5K Freedom Run registration opens in Greece

[\(/story/news/local/communities/greece/2014/06/12/k-freedom-run-registration-opens-](http://story/news/local/communities/greece/2014/06/12/k-freedom-run-registration-opens-)