

Schwirck's Blog

October 4, 2009

Deaf culture is not universal

Christy Smith and David Justice came to the University of Colorado at Boulder on Friday to give a highly anticipated presentation, but as show time approached, no excitement could be heard among the audience. No greetings, no background conversations, no nervous giggles. The silence was not due to an unenthusiastic crowd. In fact, onlookers seemed very excited. Most of the people in the room, including presenter Smith, were speaking in a language other than English, a language without words: American Sign Language.

In honor of Deaf Awareness Month, CU's Disability Services collaborated with the Center for Multicultural Affairs and various academic departments, such as the Department of Linguistics, to host Smith and Justice. Smith and Justice are the founders of Discovering Deaf Worlds, an organization created to address the hardships deaf people face in developing countries.

Smith is a native of Colorado and was the first deaf contestant on CBS's Survivor show. Smith was excited to be back in Colorado and started the presentation by giving the crowd a quick sign-language lesson. She signed her name in four different sign languages to demonstrate that sign language is not universal.

Justice, who also lived in Colorado, hopes to help the deaf community by presenting himself as an intermediary between the deaf and hearing worlds. He promotes education highly and said, "It's amazing how much the tables can turn with a little bit of opportunity."

It took Smith and Justice a year to sell their cars, drop their insurance plans, raise funds and plan a trip around the world to investigate deaf communities in countries where accessibility to language, education and community is scarce.

In Australia, the pair visited the Sydney Cochlear Implant Centre, where client relations director capitalize title Rob McLeod explained an ongoing debate involving cochlear implants. Some members of the deaf community do not believe the hearing-impaired are disabled. This population does not believe in fixing hearing loss, which is essentially what cochlear implants attempt to do.

McLeod said, "Parts of the deaf community don't agree with the things we do. We just agree to disagree." In terms of deaf culture in Australia, Smith described Australia's deaf communities as very similar to those in the United States.

Smith and Justice did not feel as comfortable in Japan.

"We were just out of our element," Smith said about their visit to Tokyo. She explained how in the United States, the deaf community is very accustomed to physical relationships. "We assume that all deaf people hug each other. That's not true in Japan. The concept was so uncomfortable for them."

Japan has a strong education system for the deaf, in which parents attend school with their child until he or she is 5 years old to ensure consistency between home and school. Furthermore, Smith said that in Japan deaf people commonly work alongside hearing people.

"When was the last time you saw a deaf waiter? Other countries are proving deaf people can work the same jobs as hearing people."

Smith and Justice first became concerned when visiting New Zealand's Christ Church Deaf Club. Justice explained that 500 deaf people belong to Christ Church, but only five interpreters are available. In New Zealand, the government is not satisfying the growing demand for deaf education. Justice said, "There is a huge demand for learning sign language and a lack of accessibility."

The team grew even more concerned in China, a country that has limited educational opportunities for deaf people.

In China, many members of the deaf community resort to thievery and joining gangs.

Deep in the mountains of Nepal, Smith and Justice hiked for 18 days to witness no deaf community at all. In small villages, deaf children are seen as a burden and often live in complete isolation with no educational opportunities. One man told Justice, "My daughter is deaf. She is a mistake from God. It's karma. She must have done something wrong in a past life."

Some developing countries are making small but important steps to help their deaf communities.

Before 1997, Cambodia had no deaf schools, no official sign language and the deaf community had little government support. Today, the deaf community in Cambodia is developing Khmer Sign Language and the Deaf Development Programme (DDP) is teaching literacy and independent living skills. However, deaf people in Cambodia are viewed as severely disabled and are often abandoned as children on the steps of DDP.

Katie MacCabe, who opened a small cafe in Cambodia in 2001 called Epic Arts, supremely impressed Justice and Smith. MacCabe opened the cafe with a desire to give deaf and disabled people employment opportunities and provide a safe place. So far, MacCabe has seen much success.

And in India, a country where deaf children are commonly abandoned and live on the streets, Smith was ecstatic to find the Delhi Foundation for Deaf Women (DFDW), where deaf women can learn vocational and literary skills. A member of DFDW said she was happy that women were finally working towards equality with men. "We are closing the gap," the member told Smith. "The government is in awe."

According to the World Federation of the Deaf, deaf people do not have equal citizenship rights in 12 countries. In these countries, deaf people cannot marry, drive or vote. To empower deaf communities around the world, the staff of Discovering Deaf Worlds is producing films, writing newsletters, blogging and presenting to schools around the United States. For more information about Discovering Deaf Worlds, visit www.discoveringdeafworlds.com

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