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#ASL MY EXPERIENCE LEARN

Most American teenagers take common language classes such as French, German, or Spanish in high school. Not everyone has the opportunity to learn a less common language, such as American Sign Language. This brings me to explaining my title, since ASL does not have a written form. My title is written in the closest equivalent of a signed sentence which is ASL gloss; it means “my experience learning American Sign Language.” When documenting in print, a gloss is used with English words using all capital letters to show, roughly, what a sentence would look like signed. Most hearing people have never heard of a gloss, and I didn’t either until 2009, when I began studying the language. I first started learning about what a gloss is and many other aspects of a rich, hidden culture from my classes in high school.

My older brothers and sisters took ASL in high school, and as a result, I started having an interest early in life. I learned to fingerspell the alphabet and practiced it growing up, waiting for the day I could take ASL classes like them. When I got to high school, I took all three years of available classes. I started them with the notion I’d be learning a secret code for English, then discovered I was very wrong. ASL is its own unique language, different from English, and carries with it a deep history of a proud, collectivist culture. Out of ignorance, I chose not to engage with that culture at the time. As a result, I never progressed in the language past a high school level and forgot most of what I learned in less than two years. During the classes, my ASL teacher told stories of how LDS sign language missionaries got to travel all over the States teaching Deaf people. That’s when I started to want to go on a sign language mission.

LDS stands for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I am a member of this church and have been my whole life, like most of my fellow Utahans. In this church, the majority of young men and many young women leave home voluntarily to go to various places, or missions, around the world for eighteen months or two years. I had decided that I, too, wanted to go on a mission and teach others about Jesus Christ while giving community service.

After graduating, working for a year, then turning in my mission papers (or application), this dream was realized. I was called to serve in the California San Jose Mission assigned to teach in ASL. I was to leave March 2014 to go to an intensive training program for missionaries, and then move to the San Francisco Bay Area for two years. At the missionary training center, or MTC, I had my first real interactions with Deaf people and studied the language hard. My time at the MTC was a lot of fun, especially when I got to learn new languages and cultures. At the training center, I had two teachers that were Deaf, my class was down the hall from Polynesian missionaries, plus other friends down the hall taught me and my friends about Mongolian culture, where they were preparing to serve in. There was so much diversity in one building, as well as the rest of the campus, and I realized I had so much to learn before I flew out to the Bay Area.

When I arrived to California in my first area, I was trained by a Deaf missionary from the Philippines and we focused our efforts on the Fremont ASL Branch of the church. We drove all around the extremely diverse Bay Area looking for and teaching the Deaf about our beliefs. My mission had people from around the world and I soon learned how satisfying it was to pick up a phrase or two in each of their languages. With other missionaries’ and friends’ help, I learned a lot of ASL, some Tongan and Mandarin, as well as a bit of 11 other languages.

Growing up in northern Utah, with very little cultural diversity, I had almost no experience with anything other than the culture here. To me, Utah culture means that we generally keep to ourselves, that we can be judgmental, that Utah is in a “bubble” not knowing what goes on in the world, and that old people here are racist. You should understand that these cultural flaws don't represent the church I belong to, but the residents here. That said, when I moved to the Bay Area and saw the different cultures from all around the world, it filled me with an insatiable thirst for languages and learning everything these people had to offer. For example, from Deaf culture, I learned the value of community, connections, and acceptance. From Tongan culture I learned the worth of fun, food, and respect. From Hispanic and Filipino cultures I learned tolerance and to avoid judging. Each of the cultures I interacted with were extremely family oriented, welcoming, and all fed me well. What I find interesting is that I only had to learn a phrase like “Good morning!” or “Hello! How are you?” and immediately there was a connection, even if I never met them before. Language truly is a bridge.

Growing up, I never saw the benefits for learning another language; I also never had any experience interacting with other cultures. Looking back, I wish I had experiences like some of my new friends in San Jose. I met one White family who had their son placed in a Mandarin immersion program. There was another family from Japan who had their daughter in a Spanish-speaking preschool. These children can grow up being bilingual and trilingual and I was extremely impressed, wishing the same for my future children. That could mean that they learn to break barriers of language and culture at a young age, and that they learn to see all of us as equals. In addition, numerous studies have shown that bilingual children excel in school, that babies can communicate with sign language significantly faster than with spoken languages, and that learning a second language while the brain is developing is more far more effective than in adulthood.

I started seeing these benefits with high school Sign Language, but from really becoming bilingual and bicultural, my life was changed. It changed because I learned why America’s cross-cultural connections are necessary. I learned valuable life lessons of unity, acceptance, and understanding, all of which were learned more effectively from accepting another culture and its associated language. There are still problems of racism, naivety, and discordance throughout the world, but these problems can indefinitely be resolved by learning additional languages and cultures.