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More universities are recognizing sign language as a foreign language

By Jamie Malernee
KRT CAMPUS

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — She is talking a mile a minute, but no words come out of her mouth.

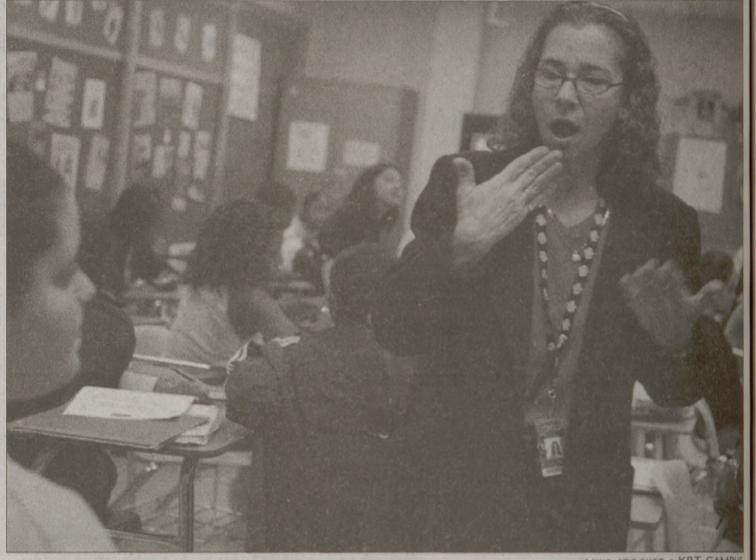
She's giving a report on Beethoven, yet the entire classroom is silent. Jessica House is a junior at South Plantation High in the midst of earning an important grade for her American Sign Language class. Her hands turn, flip, brush, slap and point as she makes her meaning known, eyebrows arching. She is one of a growing number of students who are choosing to learn the language of the deaf instead of more traditional foreign-language options such as Spanish and French.

"I get really into it. I disappear into another world when I sign," House says, explaining why she and other hearing students are drawn to the class. "It's like dancing with your hands."

In 1977, South Plantation was the first Broward public high school to offer American Sign Language, but it wasn't recognized as a foreign-language alternative until 1990. Now 11 high schools in the area have ASL classes. Six public high schools offer ASL in Palm Beach County, where enrollment has more than doubled in the past six years. In Miami-Dade, 14 schools offer ASL to about 1,680 students, although only four of those schools cater to hearing pupils.

Nationwide, ASL is also the fastest-growing foreign-language offering at U.S. colleges and universities. Since 1998, 186 new institutions have started offering ASL — for a total of 234 higher-learning establishments serving 60,000 students, according to a 2002 survey by the Modern Language Association of America.

Jennifer McGonigle-Collins, 31, was exposed to South Plantation High's program as a student, went on to study the language in college, and now is the school's only ASL



Cathy Oshrain shows a sign to one of her American sign language students at North

Miami Beach High School, in Florida, on Jan. 8, 2004.

teacher. To meet the high demand for classes, she teaches seven periods straight with no planning break. She's often on campus from 6:30 a.m. until 5:30 at night and was recently selected as a finalist for the district's Teacher of the Year.

"I feel like I'm giving back what was given to me," she says. "To see (students) get to a Level 2 or 3 and want to be an interpreter or a deaf teacher, that is so amazing because what you've done in such a short amount of time is change their life."

Many of McGonigle-Collins' students admit they initially took ASL because they've heard the class was a simple way to satisfy the foreign-language requirements

needed to get into many colleges. Although some universities still don't recognize ASL as a foreign language, the number that do is growing.

"I'm Italian and we always talk with our hands, so I thought it would be easy," jokes Cassie Rampone, 14.

But in McGonigle-Collins' class, they quickly learn ASL involves a lot more than memorizing signs. ASL has its own grammar that shuffles word order and omits or "glosses over" certain words such as "and" or "is." For example, you wouldn't say, "I'm a junior at South Plantation High," you'd say, "Junior, where?, South Plantation High."

Bonfire

Continued from page 1A

Overland Partners, the company designing the memorial. "The reason why China is importing the granite is because they were providing us with the right sizes of granite, they met the price point and the delivery schedule," Shemwell said.

Raney said money for the granite is coming from private funds, and money from A&M is not being used.

"We ordered the granite over the summer, and it took about five months for them to come in," Raney said.

Shemwell said there are more shipments coming and that all of the shipments should be delivered to A&M within six weeks to two months.

Lane Stephenson, deputy director for University Relations, said the granite portals that were delivered are each bigger than a car.

Raney said the memorial design is broken into three ideas: the tradition that brought people together, a connecting path, which will walk

visitors through the 89-year history of Bonfire preceding the collapse and the continuous ring shares the spirit that united individuals and made them a part of something greater than themselves. The 89 stones represent the number of years Bonfire burned on the A&M campus.

The memorial also includes 27 stone panels, which will connect to the portals to make a complete circle, she said. Bronze panels connecting each stone will represent the students who were injured.

Raney said there are 12 portals that stand for the 12 who died, with each portal facing the direction of their hometowns.

"This project means a lot to me," Shemwell said. "It's not easy working directly with the families of the men and women who died in the collapse. It is very emotional but also helps in healing."

Two vertical planes separate the commotion of the outer world from the intimate experience of the memorial, Raney said.

"This is going to be a remarkable and very impressive memorial," Raney said. "It is amazing how many stones are being used, and it is a first-class memorial — especially for the price. I think the bronze panels that connect each stone will look wonderful."

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