

Spoken words translated to Amesian through pantomime, sign language

Student helps deaf 'hear' religious services

By Anne Rose

Any relationship between criminal justice and sign language might seem restricted to a traffic patrolman's role. But freshman Karen McWhorter, 19, hopes someday to use her experience helping deaf persons in law enforcement.

For three weeks McWhorter has translated the Sunday morning and evening services at the First Baptist Church here into the language of the deaf.

Although less apparent than other disabilities, hearing problems afflict one-fourth of the population, McWhorter says, and "two of every 20 or 30 people are deaf."

Those called hard-of-hearing are unable to receive certain frequencies of sound. Of those designated as deaf, she says, "some have never heard. Some have turned deaf. Some are termed deaf because they can hear only high, high sounds — at high frequencies."

Seated facing the first pew, Karen translates spoken messages for these persons into visual ones. Her hands move quickly, touching each other, her forehead, chin, chest and arms —

pointing, rolling, chopping — each gesture flowing smoothly into the next.

Her facial expressions contribute to the message, as she frowns or smiles to fit the spoken words. Several times, on a recent Sunday, "proud" was used, which she conveyed by holding one hand to her chest while her eyes narrowed in a superior look. At another point she made herself small to pantomime "scrunch down."

Names mentioned from the platform had to be spelled out letter by letter on her right hand. Numbers were indicated by upraised fingers. Certain abstract words, like "independence," have no sign and also require spelling.

As she gestured she also spoke silently, for those who could lip read. However, her words differed from the speaker's. Usually the soundless words and their accompanying motions lagged one or two sentences behind, so that she was signaling one thought while listening to another.

McWhorter does not translate word for word because sign language "isn't in English, really. It's actually in something called 'Amesian,' which was developed in France.

"English has long, drawn-out, complicated sentences. We shorten what the person says."

Her audience Sunday morning included three boys aged 6, 7 and 13 and a bearded college student. Occasionally one signed to her a problem in understanding. She explained with additional motions until answering gestures indicated comprehension, then resumed her translation.

A native of Bartow, Fla., McWhorter and a co-worker at an auto dealership became intrigued by small cards they received which pictured the deaf



KAREN McWHORTER
... interpreter for the deaf

alphabet. The two enrolled in a sign language class at a nearby college in Lakeland. Before long they discovered the extra benefit of sign language for across-the-office conversations.

McWhorter's interest led her to spend a year commuting nights to study the language and its history, and also to study anatomy, psychology and chemistry and how they relate to hearing impairment.

During her Florida training, she and other students wore earplugs for 24 hours to simulate deafness. With

earplugs in, the students shopped and visited a restaurant.

"We couldn't talk, only sign or write out what we wanted. It really makes you think. It shows how much you depend on hearing."

Later she joined the Master's Hands, a sign-language choir which toured Florida. Of the 13 choir members, five were deaf. Two could sing, having lost their hearing as adults.

Though the deaf can't hear music, they enjoy the lyrics of hymns and songs, McWhorter says, because "they have a message. Depending on how you do them, they can have rhythm, too."

The McWhorter family moved to Arlington three months ago. "The deaf here like to kid me, because they say I have a Florida accent," McWhorter said, demonstrating the regional differences in the signs for heaven, justice and mercy.

McWhorter works with a partner at First Baptist, Nancy Wilson, an elementary school teacher who has known the language 20 years. Usually each translates half the service.

A team is preferred, McWhorter said, because "your hands do get tired. In an air-conditioned room, they get super cold because they're moving through the air all the time. It makes you slow down because the cold makes them tired."

Alternating interpreters can also help prevent boredom. "It catches a deaf person's attention to have more than one person signing."

The team is considering joint interpretations of the sermons to suit the different ages of their watchers. "When you have a group you have to talk on a level the child would understand, and the older ones might get bored. With

two of us, one could explain things on a more adult level."

The two women also translate Sunday school lessons. With a third interpreter, they are organizing a midweek craft class for the deaf at the church, to begin in a few months.

McWhorter chose to major in criminal justice because of her interest in counseling and her awareness of the deaf's special needs. "They (the police) have to call an interpreter to explain why deaf people have a ticket or for them to explain their problem."

McWhorter and Wilson began late in August teaching a series of free one-hour lessons in signing, held at 5:45 p.m. Sundays in room 168 of the church. Membership in the class is still open.

Persons wishing to learn more about help available for the deaf can contact the Goodrich Center for the Deaf in Fort Worth, run by the Tarrant County Service for the Health Impaired. The center sponsors a Saturday afternoon television program, "Signs of the Times."



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