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Love To Sign

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Transcript of Interview of Courtney Walker

So I was referred to you by Pamela Rohland from Disability services as a very good group to showcase URI's diversity. Who are you and what is your group?

My name is Courtney Walker and I am a freshman and the President of the American Sign Language Club here at the University of Rhode Island. Our club's purpose is to extend diversity to URI by bringing American Sign Language to the university. Most of the kids who are in the club have no previous knowledge of sign but are quickly learning. Right now I'm helping them to learn the language and the culture so that later on we can all sit around and sign together like kids having fun. ☺

How does your group bring diversity to URI?

Our ASL group brings diversity to URI by bringing the fourth most language in the US to URI. American Sign Language is a major part of society today and it's sad that people don't recognize how important it is. Not only does our club bring a whole new language and culture to URI, it brings a minority and not well thought of group to URI. Did you know that one out of 20 people is either hard of hearing or Deaf? Yeah, that's a lot of people. For me, I believe it is really important to have everyone represented at one of the most well-known universities in the US.

How did you get started in American Sign Language?

ASL was offered in my high school as a foreign language. I really couldn't understand Spanish with all the conjugations and it was just too much. So I decided instead of trying to learn another speaking language, I decided to try something totally different. For some weird reason this language just stuck, it was the easiest thing to pick up for me to learn. When I was looking for colleges, I looked for ones that had ASL classes, ones where I could continue my signing. There was a time where I wanted to change my major to be an interpreter but realized that it was just my greatest hobby. I knew that I wanted to continue signing for the rest of my life but was just something to do on the side to keep myself busy.

How did you know you wanted to start the ASL club at URI?

I don't know, I didn't know if we would get recognized by student senate or not I just knew that there had to be some way for me to keep my passion going. I looked for people on the URI class of 2015 page and I got a huge number of people that wanted to help start it. It was a lot harder to start a club than I initially realized. Well, here I am, president and now being interviewed for a movie about diversity. I couldn't have asked for anything better, other than money for books maybe*laugh.*

So how is the club going?

Ha Ha. It's getting there. We started out with maybe 5-6 active members at most. Being a president, it takes an emotional toll on you, you always wonder, How many people are going to show up today? And when I see 3 people including myself, it's kinda upsetting. You're like, wow, no one cares as much as you think, this isn't going to work out like you thought. But now, word is spreading via word of mouth and people are just stumbling upon our meetings, so now more and more people are getting involved in it. You should have seen me when we had a meeting with 9 people, I was SOOO excited and I was thinking to myself, hey, maybe this club really will make it.

What are you doing to further your club as you proceed through the year?

Well, we've ordered t-shirts so people will hopefully start seeing them and saying, oh what's that? Maybe it could be worth checking out? Umm, I've also started a little project of my own. With the guidance and drive from Melvin Wade, the director of the mulit-cultural center, I've started a petition to the university. This petition asks that classes be made available for kids to take to learn ASL and its culture and earn course credits toward their graduation. By signing the petition people (students, faculty, and staff) are agreeing that this program is great to have here and is a great opportunity for people to learn a totally different type of language. I'm hoping by the end of the semester to have close to 1,000 names on that petition to really show the university that people really do care about ASL.

You mentioned that there should be a class here to teach ASL, I thought there already was?

The class you are talking about only has a minuscule amount of ASL taught. That class is a "gestural and oral based" class. Meaning that they show you gestures and how oral methods are used. This class doesn't count as a language credit and unless you are a CMD (communicative disorders major) it's a dead course credit. It doesn't count for any credits toward graduation and it's as if you are paying for a dead class. The class that I am asking for is a class solely based around teaching ASL and its culture, because it is a language and should be taught, in my opinion, at every college.

Do you know many Deaf people?

Before my class in high school, I only knew one Deaf person. He was a friend of mines dad. Once I was in the class, my teacher, who worked at the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, CT, thought it would be really good practice for us to have pen pals at ASD. So we would make video messages to our pen pals, the videos weren't very long but enough that we got the practice we needed. On our trip to ASD, we visited our pen pals and got to be submerged in a whole day of not talking; only signing which is a lot harder than I first thought. (haha) After 2 years of that, I've gained some really close friends at ASD and students who already graduated. I keep in touch with them every so often and that's when I really get a chance to practice my signing.

Well, I think that's all I have for you, is there anything else you'd like to say?

I just want to say thank you for taking time to show who we are as a club and what we are trying to do. It's been a struggle trying to get our feet off the ground, but I think this interview will be a great way to do so. Deaf culture and Deaf awareness is really important to me so it really means a lot to me that someone is taking the time to help me raise that awareness and show hearing people what signing is all about ☺ The Deaf don't have a voice that they can show people who they are so they need someone to help them be their voice in a hearing world. I'm not the only one out there supporting the Deaf but I'm the one here at URI and I'm proud and honored to do so. I may not be perfect at signing, but I do the best I can and help the Deaf staff members by giving them someone to talk to. Also, ASL rocks! ☺