

Signs of Mental Health

Encouraging Community Engagement

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Office of Deaf Services
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Engaging the Community: Creating a “Deaf Place”

The old schoolyard riddle about which comes first, the chicken or the egg, comes to mind when thinking about the various community building activities that have grown out of the creation of services for deaf people with mental illness. The thinking behind these activities goes something like this. To build a service delivery system there have to be qualified people. People who are deaf themselves and are otherwise qualified will be more effective than those who are not deaf. To attract qualified deaf people there has to be a community that is attractive to them. And finally, vibrant communities of deaf people provide more options for normalization of deaf people with mental illness. This line of reasoning has led to several popular events in the Montgomery area. One of these is the Deaf Coffee Night project.

Charlene Crump and former ODS staffer Liz Hill felt that the community lacked activities that would help draw deaf people together. Also, there were few, if any, activities that would provide a safe environment for new signers to mingle with and use American Sign Language. The first “Deaf Coffee Night” grew from

those discussions. Meeting at a Starbucks (where else?) a dozen sign language students and a handful of deaf people got a chance to mingle. Most of the deaf people participating were employed by DMH, either in community services or at the Bailey Deaf Unit. With only a few exceptions, Deaf Coffee night has met every first Friday since then.

What started as a small project to give sign language students a venue to practice has grown into a series of opportunities for deaf people of all walks of life to come together and reconnect. It has also fueled a resurgence of activity for the local association of the deaf. While attendance fluctuates, it is not unusual to see 50 or more people crowded into the store.

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Creating a Deaf Place

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The coffee nights led to “silent suppers” at area restaurants. Meeting roughly every three months, these events draw even more people than the coffee nights. At a recent event held at the local Jason’s Deli franchise, close to 100 people showed up, essentially filling the restaurant with signing people. It can be interesting to watch “signing impaired” folks as they glance around with expressions of near-paranoia wondering if they were in a time warp. Others find the whole experience to be enriching. Katrina Nettles, the Executive Assistant to the Associate Commissioner for Mental Illness remarked that, “Attending the [Coffee Night] at Starbucks was interesting, eye-opening and gave me a different perspective of the deaf community. I was surrounded by people that were communicating and I had no clue what was being said.”

One of the not-so-unintended consequences of these activities is making people aware of Deaf people. “I think I left there with a better understanding of the challenges that a deaf person has in a hearing world. I will be attending other [Coffees]. I plan to sharpen my sign language skills and hopefully pick up a few things at the meeting,” said Nettles. No one judges people for their lack of sign language fluency—as long as an effort is made.

Such events make Montgomery a more attractive place for deaf professionals to live. Prior to 2006 there were few opportunities for deaf professionals to socialize outside of work. Having a place to go where “everyone knows your name” has an appeal. “Here, when you walk in to the coffee get-together, everyone says hello at the same time. I’ve never experienced that before,” said Harriet Hollingsworth, a deaf care worker at the Bailey Deaf Unit. The effect goes far beyond creating a “neighborhood bar,” however. It also serves as a place to educate people, share leads for possible new employees, and to debate and debunk the latest rumors from Goat Hill.

Nicole LaMont (left) shares a laugh with Johnny Sears (middle back, and Courtney Tarver (Right)

The Office of Deaf Services has long understood the need to have a highly visible presence among the deaf community. This helps promote better understanding of mental illness, the role of mental health services, and helps in identifying potential problems that might arise. It also serves to make hearing people aware that there is a population of deaf people who are fully functioning members of the community.

Differences in how deaf and hearing people negotiate awkward moments create opportunities for laughs. When 50 deaf people are crowded into Starbucks, it can be hard to get to the service counter. Deaf people are used to this, of course. They just gently push their way through to where they need to go. Hearing people are used to saying

“excuse me.” Watching hearing people talking to the back of a deaf person’s head makes for some hilarity!

Making the community a more welcoming place for both consumers who are deaf and mentally ill as well as the staff who work with them has proven to be a rewarding effort. ✎

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GO: Join Deaf Coffee Night. First Friday of every month.
Starbucks 2107 Eastern Blvd.
Montgomery

