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Deaf professor shares knowledge of ASL to local community

Katie Downing | contributing writer Feb 5, 2019 Updated Feb 5, 2019



Bavister first began substituting for JMU 18 years ago and was hired as an adjunct professor shortly after.

Photo courtesy of Rachel Bavister

Born deaf, Professor Rachel Bavister's first language was sign language. She grew up with a passion for learning that turned into a passion for teaching. Bavister teaches American Sign Language classes with her colleague Bobbie Dietz at the Fishersville branch of the Augusta County public libraries every Thursday. Bavister can also be found teaching at JMU every Wednesday.

“Sign Language is a language (albeit foreign to many), and that’s how we are teaching it,” Bavister said in an email. “It’s the 3rd or 4th most popular foreign language taught on campuses today, and is gaining tons of respect. Just like any other language, it has grammar, syntax, vocabulary, a rich and diverse linguistic history, and it changes over time.”

Both Bavister and Dietz were instructors at the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind in Staunton for over 30 years, and Bavister still tutors there after hours. They wanted to use their experiences of growing up deaf to make a difference and decided to do that through teaching.

Dietz has been teaching ASL for 27 years. She currently teaches at the University of Virginia and recently accepted a position at Radford University. Bavister and Dietz also both received a federal grant to train educational interpreters for five to six years at Danville Community College.

Bavister began her teaching career in 1978 at Blue Ridge Community College, where she taught English as a second language to deaf adults. She began teaching ASL classes there 15 years ago. Bavister substituted for a professor at JMU 18 years ago and was subsequently offered a position as an adjunct professor. As someone who’s been deaf her whole life, Bavister is proud to introduce students to ASL.

“If people know Sign Language, try using it,” Bavister said in an email. “If one isn’t fluent, then writing back and forth is good. I like it when people don’t give a damn we are Deaf, and just recognize the need to communicate. Never, never say “Tell you later” because that’s a lie; or “I’m sorry” then walk on. Hell, we’re not sorry we’re Deaf.”

Dietz attended West Virginia School for the Deaf in Romney, West Virginia from 1960-1978. Bavister attended Lawns House School in Leeds, Yorkshire from 1947-1955, then the Mary Hare School for the deaf in Newbury, Berkshire, in England from 1955-1961. Bavister was constantly surrounded by other people who signed and didn’t feel any any different than her peers. She enjoyed the residential school setting back then and could read by the age of three.

“Both Bobbie and I attended residential schools with other Deaf students,” Bavister said in an email. “School taught us how to address the world at large, and that was great. I want that for Deaf students today — to know that they are no different than their hearing peers, and they all have rights and responsibilities.”

Bavister's favorite part of teaching is the people she meets and the ability to impart her skills and knowledge on them. Her humor and passion have made a lasting impression on her students and she's even encouraged some of them to pursue careers within the Deaf community. Emily McMillon, recent graduate of Radford University, met Bavister while taking ASL classes at BRCC when she was in high school and currently teaches elementary schoolers at the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind after completing a high-school internship there.

"She really has a wonderful sense of humor and she made every class so much fun, and it's really intimidating for a person to commit to a class that is taught by a deaf person because you can't fall back on the speaking if you need to, and it really opens up this whole new world of Deaf culture," McMillon said.

Bavister and Dietz decided to conduct sign language classes at the library after seeing a Facebook post asking for sign language teachers. People can register for the class ahead of time or walk in. As "native" sign language speakers, Bavister and Dietz are proud to share their skills and inspire their students.

Rachel Effinger took ASL classes through the Staunton Department of Parks & Recreation with her sister. She met Bavister during those classes and later attended Danville Community College during Bavister's tenure there. Bavister inspired Effinger and she has since received a Certificate of Interpreting and currently works as an ASL interpreter in a hospital setting and at public schools.

"The reason I became an interpreter is she was just such a great teacher," Effinger said. "She would make you learn and love the language. She was a great role model for the Deaf community."

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