



Education for Deaf Students at LaGuardia Community College



Rebecca Aranow's painting communicates a warm feeling at LaGuardia Community College's Program for Deaf Students.

For children who can hear, the process of learning to communicate is so gradual and natural that they cannot remember the stages by which it was mastered; they come up against the difficulty of learning language only when they try to learn a foreign language. For those born unable to hear, however, their native language is a foreign language.

Most of us feel greater sympathy and make greater accommodation for the visually-impaired and the physically disabled than for the deaf. We cannot see or hear "deafness". It occurs to few of us that in higher

education, where the mastery of abstract concepts and sophisticated vocabulary is essential, deaf persons are at a greater disadvantage than the visually-impaired and physically handicapped persons who have acquired language through their ears. Deaf persons, in fact, especially those who have been deaf since birth, may be the most seriously handicapped student. The City University has undertaken to educate.

The Program for Deaf Adults (PDA) at LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City was initiated in 1974. By the Spring of 1985, one hundred and sixty deaf

students were enrolled in the program. In March 1985 the program received impetus and encouragement when Governor Cuomo addressed one hundred of these students, attended their classes, and pledged \$150,000 in State support to PDA. Without special funding, the high cost of the program would be prohibitive. To meet the needs of its present student population and reach those in the city who can profit from it, LaGuardia offers a comprehensive program in continuing and cooperative education. Students elect courses from five areas of concentration, all of them supported by special testing for placement, counseling, and the services of trained interpreters and instructors.

The Guided Independent Study Program (GIS), for instance, offers non-credit courses emphasizing the information and skills bearing upon educational and vocational opportunities—courses in Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language for the foreign-born deaf, Preparation for the General Equivalency Diploma, College Preparation Education and College Study Skills. This GIS program also offers courses in computers and wordprocessors and such "personal development" courses as Photography and Driver Education. The GIS, which has grown from twenty-two students per quarter to ninety in the Spring of 1985, has been augmented by funding from the New York State Vocational Education Act of 1976 and the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) to offer students courses in food services and cler-

ical skills as well. With increasingly enthusiastic cooperation of industries and offices, program director Fern Khan reports, her staff not only trains students but places them in internships where they learn and later, earn on the job. The initial reluctance to hire a deaf person is being converted into an informed concern to utilize their potential as reliable and capable employees. The job-developer for the LaGuardia PDA carries with her a tape to demonstrate "what a hearing-impaired person hears"—a demonstration, apparently, that speaks louder than words.

Increasingly, there is a need for more instructors who are qualified to teach deaf students. The PDA staff presently consists of six full-time professionals, two part-time professionals, eleven paraprofessionals who serve as tutors, eighteen part-time interpreters, and four to six adjunct instructors. A third are deaf; all are skilled communicators. Most of the tutors are deaf, and those who can hear must be able to sign. Interpreters are assigned to students taking credit courses; they are rarely needed in the non-credit courses, where students and teachers communicate in sign language. The coordinator of Tutorial Services, Dorothy Pakula, was the first deaf graduate of LaGuardia Community College.

The need to communicate with deaf persons has evoked a sympathetic response not only in employers through the JTPA Program but in academic instructors at the college and in students with normal hearing who realize



Coordinator Carole Lazorisak and Director Fern Kahn discuss their paperwork.

they are handicapped by not knowing a language the deaf population understands. It is now possible for hearing students at LaGuardia, for example, to take a course in American sign language for academic credit toward an Associate of Arts Degree.

LaGuardia's success with GIS students has enabled the college to encourage the enrollment of deaf students who obtain their GED into credit courses as well. There are now forty-five students working for academic degrees in "all curricular areas." LaGuardia, (Fern Khan explains) as the only college in the city to offer both credit and non-credit courses for deaf students can be justifiably encouraged by the numbers of students who graduate from non-credit to credit courses. She believes that the college environ-

ment stimulates these students to achieve what their nonhandicapped peers achieve. Most come from families and schools where communication is minimal. Even after graduation from high school, many do not possess an academic diploma and are unaware of postsecondary opportunities. Those "lucky" enough to find even low-paying jobs are frequently frustrated by their limitations for advancement. At LaGuardia, says Khan, "deaf students see deaf people achieving, working and doing well." Those placed in outside positions know that the staff at the college can intercede to solve problems and misunderstandings that arise in connection with their work. "They know we are here . . . they can call on us." The special resources required to educate deaf persons for careers

and improved employment present a staggering budgetary burden, a burden that has been borne in part by state and federal funds (from the United States Department of Education, the New York State Department of Education, the Vocational Education Act and the Job Training Partnership Act). According to a recent evaluator, however, the PDA program "has far outstripped the resources available to it," despite the generous support of the college President, Joseph Shenker and the success of Director Khan and her staff as fund raisers from the state and the community. They proceed, nevertheless, in the expectation that if they continue to educate not only the deaf but the hearing majority who have been traditionally "deaf" to the need of this promising minority, the support will continue and become commensurate with the need.

Because of PDA's unique position in higher education for the hearing-impaired in New York City, Fern Khan hopes to establish a research center for collecting and developing materials for higher education. She points out that much research has been done on elementary and secondary education for the deaf but very little on the efforts made at postsecondary levels. Fern Khan's interest in disseminating information not only to the deaf adults but about deaf adults is an idealism shared by many Americans today: the incorporation of minorities into the mainstream of the nation's life, socially, economically, and intellectually. Director Khan whose background is social work, says she is "very in-



Girl talk in the LaGuardia Community College cafeteria.

terested in working with populations who need support or special programs or access. I like developing programs." Three years ago she initiated a program which now provides academic and leisure activities for children at the college on Saturday mornings—"a college for children". There is a program for deaf children called "Exploring New York City" funded by the Queensborough president, Donald Manes.

The Coordinator of the Deaf Programs, Carol Lazorisak, works hand-in-hand with Fern Khan and Dorothy Pakula, Coordinator of Tutorial Services. Until this year,

Deborah Copeland served as their Academic Counselor. Now Lehman College has hired her to develop an upper-level program which will enable graduates from LaGuardia's PDA to continue work toward the Bachelor's Degree. "We have the students," Director Khan asserts, and thanks to her efforts and those who work with her, the students now have programs.