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Supervisors of the special programs for the deaf at La Guardia Community College in Long Island City are, from left, Jo Ann Kranis, coordinator; Fern Khan, director; Deborah Copeland, counselor; Claudia Gregory, assistant counselor, and Carole Lazorisak, coordinator. Miss Gregory and Miss Lazorisak are deaf.

College in Queens Teaches the Deaf

By ESTHER B. FEIN

The other day, Claudia Gregory received an award from her teachers at La Guardia Community College. They told her she was a very special student who answered voices that told her she had a very special song to sing.

Miss Gregory smiled and ran her right hand up her left arm in small, choppy stops. "I have upgraded myself," she said, voicing the words she had expressed with her hands.

Claudia Gregory is deaf. Spinal meningitis caused a loss of hearing when she was 2 years old; with the help of a hearing aid, she can discern background noises. But it is not so important to Miss Gregory that she does not hear professors lecturing and doors closing and typewriters hammering. What is important, she says, is that she listened when a voice told her she had more to give.

10th Anniversary

"I was a key punch operator for 12 years," said the 36-year-old Miss Gregory, who graduated from La Guardia yesterday with an associate's degree in psychology. She plans to continue her education at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

"I enjoyed it, but I realized I would never get a promotion," she said. "I knew there was a different person I could be, so I decided to go back to school. I chose La Guardia because I wanted my deafness to be treated as a factor, not an obstacle."

La Guardia, in Long Island City, Queens, is celebrating the 10th anniversary of its programs for deaf adults, which since 1975 has given Miss Gregory and many others a college education they otherwise might never have had. The program is the largest academic program for deaf adults in the New York area.

This year there are 160 hearing-impaired students among the 16,000 students enrolled at La Guardia, up from 40 students in 1982. School officials expect that rate of growth to continue as

children who became deaf as a result of a rubella epidemic of the mid-1960's — about 11,500 nationwide — reach college age.

"It tears at you," said Joseph Shenker, president of La Guardia. "The need is there, the need is growing. But there is no other college in the city that services the deaf in a consolidated program of counselors, support staff, interpreters and course choice."

Four schools nationwide have been targeted for major Federal financing for undergraduate programs for deaf students: the University of California at Northridge, Seattle Community College, the St. Paul Vocational Technical Institute and the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

In addition, two colleges are specifically for the deaf, Gallaudet in Washington and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester. Some schools make provisions on an individual basis for deaf students.

La Guardia's program is financed through Federal and state grants and allocations from the school budget.

"Serving deaf students is the single most expensive program, and the hardest to get funding for," Mr. Shenker said. "As a lobbying group, the deaf community is a silent group. They do not speak well in public and they are unable as a population in general to make a vigorous case for their own needs."

"On top of that, serving the deaf is not a one-cost item, fix-the-problem issue," he continued. "With wheelchair students, you can build a ramp and widen doorways. For blind students, you put Braille plates on the elevators. But for the deaf student, you need an interpreter in every class, at every event."

The program started informally in 1973 after some La Guardia students who were interns at the Lexington School for the Deaf in Jackson Heights told their college administrators about the need of deaf students for post-secondary education.

"It struck a chord, it interested us," said Fern Khan, director of community service programs, which oversees the programs for deaf adults. "But we didn't know what to do or where to begin. So we decided to go to the deaf community to ask what they wanted, what they needed."

The administrators found interest in academic courses like literature and in self-improvement courses like tennis. So they designed a program of credit and noncredit courses, including some just for deaf students and some that would put deaf students with hearing students.

They established a specially trained staff of counselors and advisers, a career development office and an organization for deaf-student activities. A course in sign-language was offered for hearing students.

And the college, Mrs. Khan said, made a commitment to regard a student's deafness as a consideration, not a handicap. Technical courses, like word processing and office skills, are taught in all-deaf classes, but deaf students can register for any course. Every deaf student is entitled to a sign-language interpreter in class.

"To sit among fellow students, both hearing and deaf — that is freedom," said Carole Lazorisak, coordinator of programs for deaf adults, who has been deaf since birth.

Hearing students and teachers at La Guardia are accustomed to seeing people using sign language. They have learned to speak slowly and distinctly so their lips can be read. Miss Gregory recalled with affection a teacher who trimmed his mustache so she could read his lips more easily.

Miss Gregory said she was nervous about leaving La Guardia, about leaving her family in Brooklyn and moving with her 12-year-old daughter, Shea, to attend school in Tennessee. But she said she would return when she has her degree in psychology, and would teach other deaf students.

"There is a special person inside everyone," she said. "They just have to look for it and listen to it."