

FOCUS ON...
KIM PUDANS-SMITH

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Imagine walking into your classroom on the first day of a new semester, and upon greeting your students, you are met with total silence. One of a college educator's worst nightmares, right? Well, for one of our colleagues at the Wilmington campus, not only does this happen regularly, but it is *perfectly normal*. You see, she is deaf.

Kim Pudans-Smith, who teaches in the ASL (American Sign Language) program in the Language and Culture Department, is a third-generation deaf person. To Kim and an increasingly large segment of the deaf community, this is no different from saying that another person is a third-generation Italian-American. This is because their deafness does not ascribe to them the status of having a disability; rather, it means instead that they belong to a distinct *culture*.



Kim Pudans-Smith

The notion of deafness-as-culture may seem a bit of a stretch to the uninitiated. After all, cultures generally come from a particular *place*, their members share common customs, beliefs, language, and artifacts. Yet, as Kim is quick to point out, culture “does not require a land mass”—and in a world in which most cultural groups have long since been scattered far and wide, a common place is at best a remote link to another time—and in all other respects, the deaf do appear to exhibit the characteristics of a culture. Their common language is ASL, though like other cultural groups they have often been pressured to accommodate the dominant culture's language, in their case by being made to learn lip reading and speech. Even the artifacts they most rely on are distinct, tied to their need for visual and tactile cues, such as the TTY (teletypewriter) devices and flashing lights found in deaf homes, to alert them to a phone call or visitor. And their distinct customs and beliefs derive from their common struggle to negotiate a world dominated by hearing people—people who either out of insensitivity, ignorance, or fear can make that world a pretty cold and inhospitable place.

Kim left her native Iowa in search of a stronger sense of community. So in a way, deaf culture *is* tied to an element of physical place. She relocated in Washington, DC, where she studied political science at Gallaudet University, the world's only institution of higher education for the deaf. Following that, she attended school in western Maryland for deaf education.

Since coming to Delaware Tech, Kim has responded to the challenges of working with hearing colleagues and students. Delaware's relatively small deaf population has not made it easy for her to help her students, who generally plan to become sign language interpreters, to develop the holistic skill of being able to communicate effectively with the deaf. To do so requires not only mastering the hand gestures of the language, but the many other visual cues and nuances of conversational etiquette that, taken together, compose far more than a language: they constitute a set of cultural rules and all that is associated with learning about another culture.

Kim would love for more of her colleagues—those of us who make up the *hearing* faculty—to learn something about her culture and how to say hello to her in her native language. That way, when we countenance her delightful presence in the hallway, we need not be unsure what to do. Toward this end, she has graciously offered to lead a “lunch and learn” session about sign language and deaf culture.