

Neighbor


Time out! Sunday
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Amy Bruder, right, works with Josh Medernach, 8, of Palatine, left, and Christopher Qian, 9, of Glenview at Alexander Graham Bell Montessori School in Mount Prospect.

Word power

Cued Speech program teaches deaf children to communicate

BY EILEEN O. DADAY

Daily Herald Correspondent

One year ago, 8-year-old Josselin Garcia came to this country from her native Honduras unable to speak, read or communicate.

Josselin is profoundly deaf. Today, though, she can be found at school working with a speech therapist, repeating words that represent the pictures on flashcards.

Again and again her teacher had her repeat certain words, trying to refine her articulation and inflection, and Josselin seems to comprehend every instruction.

Unable to benefit from hearing aids or a cochlear implant, Josselin understood her teacher by reading her lips and watching the series of hand signals, or cues, she made for each sound in the words.

Greg Huber of Naperville, whose family is sponsoring her through an international child relief organization, sought out the one school literally in

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the country, he said, who could help her: Alexander Graham Bell Montessori School in Mount Prospect. "She is beginning to soar in the world of spoken language," Huber said proudly. "Our hope is that by learning English she will then be able to learn Spanish, and one day be able to return and communicate with her family."

Instead of using American Sign Language, the school uses a method called Cued Speech to teach students from age 3 to 12 who are deaf and have hearing difficulties.

An administrator at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., — the only liberal arts college in the country for the deaf — designed the method.

What motivated Dr. Orin Cornett were studies that indicated the average



Josselin Garcia, 8, of Naperville counts using Cued Speech. The native of Honduras is learning to communicate in English now but eventually will be able to use Cued Speech to communicate in Spanish.

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reading level of a deaf high school graduate was beneath the fourth grade.

"Their English speaking level was so low, they couldn't master reading," said Nancy Burke, director of programs at Alexander Graham Bell Montessori School.

Cornett wanted to make spoken English visibly distinct and clear, and yet he still wanted to devise a system that was easy enough for parents to learn and that could adapt to other languages.

The Cued Speech system he came up with in 1965 is a manual system that uses one hand to form eight shapes for consonant sounds and four positions around the mouth for vowel sounds.

Cued Speech is used in combination with spoken language, so that a student learns lip reading along with the cues. Eventually, the student is fluent in lip reading and can function in the speaking world as easily as in the deaf community.

Most importantly, the student is learning to map words phonetically or grouping sounds together to form words. These are important building blocks to learning how to read, school officials say, and that is what drives them to promote its use.

Cornett knew he was on to something after working with his first student, who was a 22-month-old profoundly deaf toddler. Within six months of learning Cued Speech, the child had a vocabulary of 450 words.

More than 20 years later, a group of North and Northwest suburban families of profoundly deaf children searched for a school that would teach their youngsters Cued Speech. What they found was a deaf educator in Milwaukee, Ann Bleuier, who had trained under Cornett.

Short of opening their own private school, they instead approached a local Montessori school about the idea of partnering in a unique education project.

"The idea was for there always to be a peer group for the deaf, but for them to be mainstreamed with other children," said Holly Trueblood, executive director. "The regular students would set the academic bar and provide a normal social setting."

The original seven students with hearing difficulties who attended school in the Montessori setting now either are in college or have graduated and are pursuing master's degrees, school officials say. Currently, 20 percent of the students



Amy Bruder talks with students, both hearing and deaf, using distinct hand motions that make up Cued Speech.

Teacher Debbie Blackburn and student Josselin Garcia, 8, of Naperville talk using Cued Speech, a method that uses hand motions to map out the phonetics of words, which allows a deaf person to communicate easily and to learn to read proficiently.



have a hearing loss. Students come from Arlington Heights, Mount Prospect, Prospect Heights, Des Plaines, Buffalo Grove and Wheeling and as far away as Naperville, Evanston and McHenry.

Huber remains the school's biggest promoter and serves as president of its board of directors. In one of his roles as ambassador for the school, he has developed a video he shot of Josselin filmed a few months ago.

In it she appears with her mother who is astonished when she sees what Josselin is starting to do: She is starting to read.