

Signing for Life

The Kansas School for the Deaf enriches lives through language.

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From smiles to sign language, communication is a powerful skill. It breaks cultural boundaries. It facilitates higher learning. It evokes emotion. To communicate is essential to enhancing the quality of life.

Language development starts well before verbalization is possible, but what many people may not realize is that the ability to actively communicate can also start before one can utter a single word.

The first language babies can learn is sign language. Signing eases frustrations for baby and parent and enhances brain development in infants. It is a method of communication just as, if not more, powerful than any spoken language.

And, since Johnson County houses one of the nation's largest deaf communities (second only to Rochester, NY, home of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf), it is only fitting that we have an exemplary school for the deaf right in our backyard.

COMMUNICATE AND CONNECT

The Kansas School for the Deaf (KSD) in Olathe reaches its 150th anniversary this year and plans to celebrate in September. The school teaches American Sign Language (ASL)

to more than 150 students in all grade levels, plus to outreach students across the state, but the school also focuses on teaching English.

Superintendent for Kansas State Schools for the Deaf and Blind, Madeleine Burkindine, clarifies the misconception that the school teaches only sign language.

"It is not right to *not* teach English," Burkindine says. "Our main goal is to give students access to both languages. First we teach American Sign Language in a social way then the students receive it academically. Second, we teach English for academia to connect reading and writing."

The school actively uses American Sign Language at all times. "For some students, we teach ASL as a second language if their spoken or written English is considered as the first language," Burkindine says.

The school has future plans to work with transition-level students who are pursuing higher education by helping them to enter the working world and to be successful, independent young adults. As part of this plan, the school is undergoing renovations to incorporate student apartments on its campus.

"Every student at the high school and college level has to learn a new way of life," Burkindine says. "It is no different for deaf students, but they also have to arrange interpreters and learn how to work with them."

The most inspiring aspect of the school, Burkindine says, is to "see students who are struggling come to us and be so excited to see others who can sign and be like them. Being able to communicate to others is so exciting for the students and watching them learn is so exciting for me."

BEYOND THE SCHOOL WALLS

"We have seen tremendous communal involvement when it comes to the deaf," Burkindine says. "This is needed since more than 10,000 deaf and hard of hearing people live in Olathe alone," she says.

Burkindine says the Kansas School for the Deaf has received a general feeling of warmth from the community. "That includes local businesses taking the time to educate employees on common social signs to the hospital endowment supplying interpreters for patients," she says.

Even the Olathe School District has made a point to emphasize the importance and relevance of signing. By enrolling in American Sign Language, students in the Olathe district can fulfill their foreign language requirement.

A WORTHWHILE COMMUTE

Olathe resident Kathi Hesser has triplets who have attended the school from the time they were in sixth grade. One has graduated



and two will finish next year. Hesser, originally from Nebraska, sought out the Kansas School for the Deaf and their family changed living arrangements so their three children could attend the school.

"At that time we were looking for a school that could provide strong academic support as well as deaf peers and deaf adult role models for the children," says Hesser. "Our goal was to provide the kind of opportunity that would prepare them for college and allow them to participate more fully in the community. KSD and Olathe have provided just such an environment."

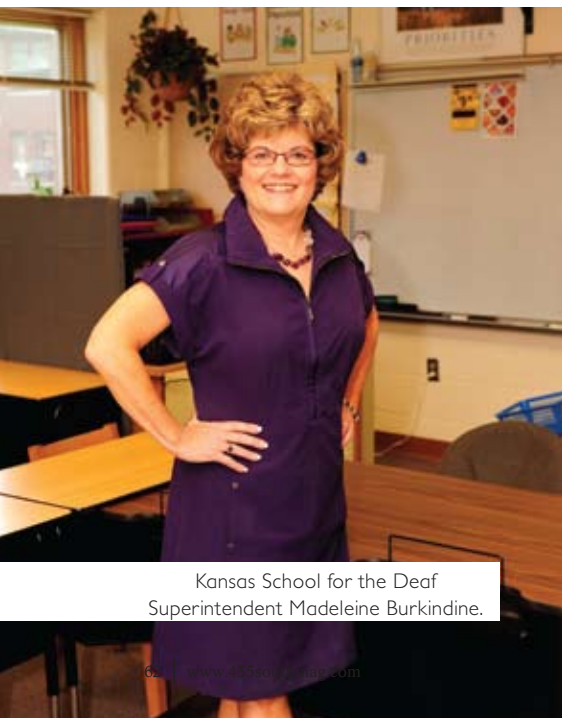
Hesser and her husband made the decision that she would move to Olathe and live there with the kids during the school year, and they would take turns commuting on weekends. She regrets nothing about the life-changing decision.

"All three have been able to participate fully in extracurricular activities at KSD," Hesser says. "They have developed confidence and self-esteem because of their involvement at KSD and Olathe's deaf community. We feel strongly that our decision was the right one and that KSD is an asset to Johnson County, and the state of Kansas." ♦

For more information on the Kansas School for the Deaf, visit www.ksdeaf.org.

SAVE THE DATE TO CELEBRATE!

All of the 150th Celebration events will be held September 22 to 25, 2011, on the KSD campus located at 450 E. Park Street in Olathe. The 150th Celebration Gala is scheduled for 5 p.m., September 24, 2011. This event will be off-campus at the Ritz Charles located at 9000 W. 137th Street in Overland Park.



Kansas School for the Deaf Superintendent Madeleine Burkindine.

