

Record Crowd Assembles at Deaf Studies IV Conference in Bost

by Nancy L. Abbott

Special to THE NAD BROADCASTER

Over 512 people attended the fourth Deaf Studies National Conference in Woburn, Massachusetts held last April 27-30th. Touted as "Deaf Studies IV: 'Visions of the Past—Visions of the Future,'" this conference drew participants from all across the country as well from Canada, Sweden, Norway and Japan.

The conference was sponsored by Gallaudet University's College for Continuing Education; the Gallaudet University Regional Center at Northern Essex Community College; Boston University's Center for the Study of Communication and Deafness and Northeastern University. It was located to attract northeastern residents to this conference which has been offered in Dallas (April, 1991), Washington, D.C. (Oct., 1991) and Chicago (April, 1993). This was the first time it has been offered in the northeast, and was the first time that it has been offered east of Washington, D.C.

In addition to the main conference, a pre-conference workshop was offered by Gallaudet's Continuing Education Department. The two-day workshop by Janet Weinstein focused on sharing successful strategies for teaching Deaf Studies to educators of school-aged students. Methods to increase self-esteem of all deaf students was also emphasized. Participants had the option of earning Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for attending this colloquium.

The conference began with a reception at the host hotel, Holiday Crown Plaza in Woburn on Thursday night. On-going events featured various business exhibits and the De'VIA Exhibit Manifesto. The later was an exhibit of visual art by deaf artists whose work focused on their perceptions based on their deaf experiences. The artists included were: Chuck Baird; Susan "Vito" Dupor; Lee S. Ivey; Betty G. Miller; Ralph R. Miller, Sr.; Elizabeth A. Morris; Ann Silver; Marjorie Stout; Eddie Swayze; Mary J. Thornley and Harry R. Williams. The evening ended with social mingling that attracted not only those who were attending their first Deaf Studies conference, but also many of those who have attended past conferences.

Friday

The Friday morning session began with riveting lectures by Ben Bahan and Joan Poole Nash. Bahan spoke briefly about the development of the deaf community and mentioned that he worked with Nash on Martha's Vineyard, then he introduced Nash.

Nash's presentation on her filmed interviews with Martha's Vineyard's elder residents about the sign language used many years ago by deaf residents of Martha's Vineyard endeared her to conference participants. This was a subject close to the heart of many participants mainly because the research done on this Massachusetts island's deaf occupants a decade ago generated a spark igniting the current growing interest in deaf culture.



Ben Bahan, Keynote Speaker, Opening Day

Nash went on to explain that this interest was intensified when Nora Ellen Groce wrote her book, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language* in 1985. At that time Nash was not ready to release her taped interviews of the native Vineyarders using the signs they knew. With this conference and with Bahan's encouragement, was she ready to share these films. She further illustrated various signs and in doing so added some personal glimpses of deaf individuals such as the following story about Jared Mayhew, a deaf man who was born in 1852 in Chilmark, where most of the Island's deaf inhabitants lived.

"On one occasion, Joan's grandfather invited a ministry student home with him one weekend. While there, he was asked to give a sermon in the local Methodist church. Unknown to him, Jared Mayhew was in the front pew with his hearing wife, Lutie.

Throughout the sermon, Lutie was interpreting for her husband. Afterwards, when her grandfather's friend got to his host's home, he was asked by her great-grandmother if he thought his sermon was well-received. He responded that everything went fine, but commented further that there was one lady in the front pew was very nervous as her hands kept going all the time. After the situation was explained, he began to understand what was really going on."

This story, among others, endeared itself to the conference participants and drew fevered "waving hands" from the conference participants.

Workshop speakers covered numerous topics such as: Deaf Studies; Literature; ASL Development; Empowerment; and History. Friday's special issues focused on deaf gay culture; African issues and even the cochlear implant controversy. It was clear to conference organizers which workshops were the most popular for Friday, the first day: Eric Shapiro's "Gay Signs" (Amazing Clues to Community Structure, Culture, History), and

Lynn Jacobowitz's "Deaf I Dr. Barbara Kannapell wh "Deaf People's Contribution World War II" and Lindsa "Deaf People of African H and the Struggle for Equal Opportunity."



Dr. Barbara Kannapell lectures about recognition of ASL at the Federal government level.

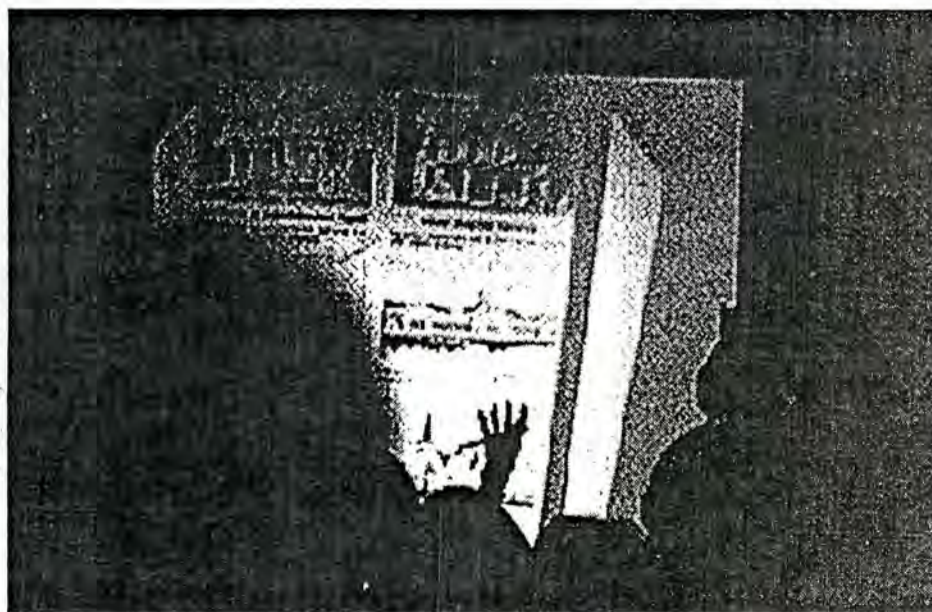
Giving the participants a break on Friday evening, actress and performer Mary Beth Miller wowed two ballrooms packed full of people for nearly an hour and half (this was open to the local community, and many non-conference attendees came). Constant waving hands and laughs were seen and heard through the evening.

Saturday

The Saturday sessions were kicked off by lectures from Dr. Lars Wallin of Sweden, and Marie Philip of The Learning Center for Deaf Children in Framingham, MA.

In his speech, Dr. Wallin pointed out that historically, the foundation of the Swedish deaf society stemmed from the Swedish National Association of the Deaf (SDR), The Swedish National Athletes Association of the Deaf (SDI) and the deaf schools. In recent years, though, this concept has changed. In today's world, the Swedish deaf society has undergone wider exposure affecting their education, language, professional opportunities and their social life. No longer are they limited to just three choices professions: shoemaking, tailoring and carpentry. Their sign language has undergone extensive study and research.

That day's workshops covered such topics as Douglas Bahl's efforts to preserve deaf heritage landmarks (see photo, left); Holly Roth's "Usage of Classifiers in Storytelling", Dr. Clayton Valli's "ASL Poetry", and a deaf artists panel discussion of De'VIA (Deaf View/Image Art).



Douglas Bahl (in the dark at right) shows samples of historical landmarks related to Deaf Heritage.

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On Sunday, the conference welcomed the internationally known Dr. Harlan Lane of Northeastern University whose lecture addressed the question "Are Deaf People Disabled? Disability and Cultural Models of Deaf People."

Dr. Lane pointed out deaf issues have been traditionally decided by hearing people. While the 1988 revolution (Deaf President Now) brought about an abrupt redistribution of power and a heightened awareness of power relations between hearing professionals and deaf people, they still need another revolution to continue the growth of the deaf community. Lane further explained that it is necessary to evoke a profound reorganization of thought, in which old categories are demolished, new ones created, and people, artifacts, and events redistributed and reinterpreted. Lane, in his ending statements, envisioned deaf children growing in a world in which they are seen not as disabled but in another way, as members of a disabled minority. In that world, deaf children will intermix with other deaf children, and be proud of being deaf. Deaf studies would be featured every year during their schooling—just as hearing children study their language

and culture formally while they are in school.



Scene showing five methods of communication used during one presentation, L-R: Japanese Sign Language interpreter (seated), Signed English interpreter (standing on floor), Swedish Sign Language interpreter (foreground), ASL interpreter (standing on stage), and Dr. Harlan Lane using spoken English.

learned about this conference when two American women invited them to attend. Throughout their stay these seven young women learned many details about American deaf culture. One lecture exposed them to the CODA (Children of Deaf Adults) experience which left them baffled. They were confused at the warmth between an American CODA and a Japanese CODA who bonded when they first met, because in the Japanese culture, 'bonding' between individuals outside of the family unit is not widely practiced. After several attempts to explain the feelings, they began to realize that it was the shared experiences and feelings that crossed over the barriers of unfamiliarity.

Another incident happened when the Japanese women viewed video-

people's experiences in World War II. When they return to Japan, they will begin researching their deaf countrymen's experiences in World War II.

Conclusion

There was a joke that made its way around this conference:

"What did one hearing person say to another hearing person at this conference?" "I don't know, the interpreter didn't show up!"

That's because in this conference one had to "know, breathe and think" in sign language. Flying fingers were seen in every nook and cranny during this conference. There were talks on ASL structure, deaf history, deaf literature; ASL Poetry; deaf humor and even deaf empowerment. If one was a non-signer, he was definitely in the minority.

After Dr. Lane's presentation, a panel, moderated by E. Lynn Jacobowitz, drew comments from the following participants; Dr. Lawrence Fleischer; Dr. Yerker J. Andersson; Ben Bahan, Dr. Barbara Kannapell, Marie J. Philip and Steve Nover. They focused on the justifications of setting up a Deaf Studies program, including the fact that professionals in Deaf Studies and ASL Specialists will not be recognized until professional standards and licensure is established.

It was announced that the NAD is currently sponsoring and funding development of ASL Specialists standards, and also standards in Deaf Studies under the NAD Education Committee. In addition, the NAD will gather information from the recommendations raised at this conference. (See ASL-TALK on page 6 for more information.)

International Perspectives

This conference drew a large group of international deaf people, including a Gallaudet senior from Norway who will be returning to her native land to set up a deaf television program; Dr. Lars Wallin, from Sweden; many Canadian individuals; and a group of Japanese young women which included a Gallaudet student.

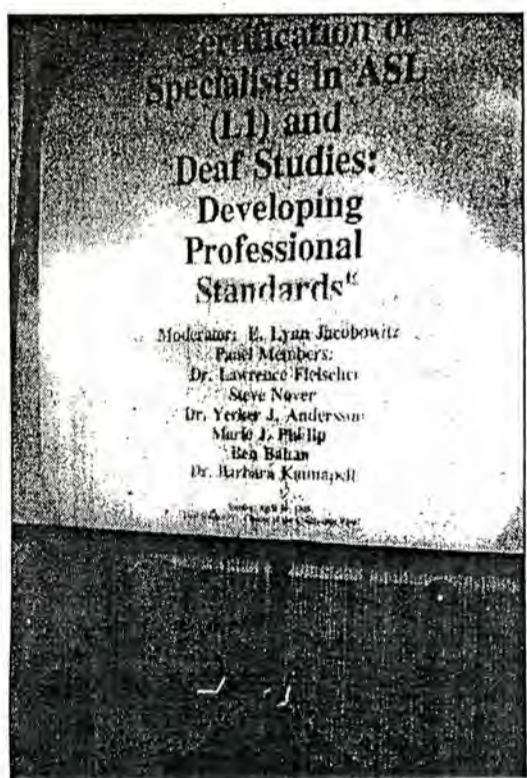
This later group drew the most attention throughout the conference because it was obvious they were conversing in a different sign language, and two interpreters accompanied them at all times. This group's trip was financed by a Japanese youth group. The group first



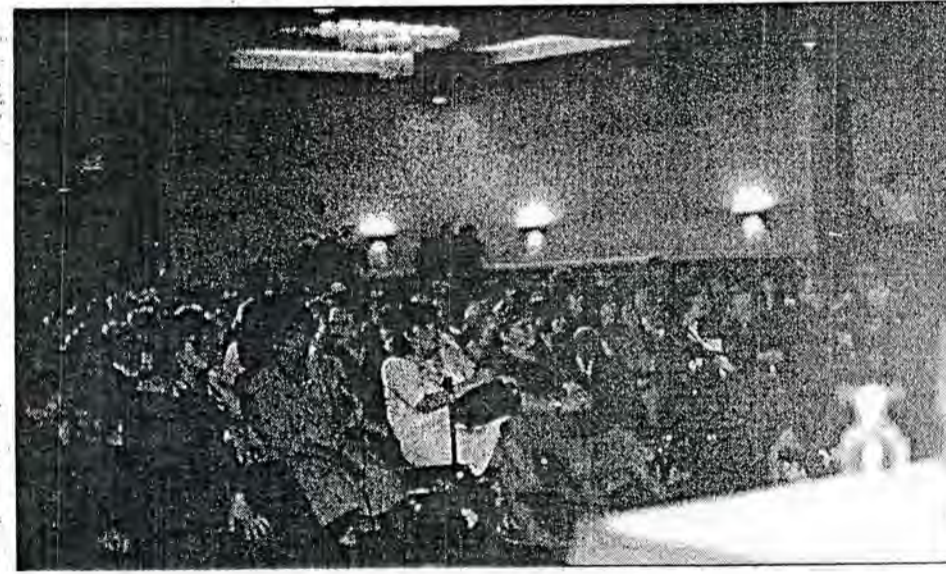
Leo M. Jacobs, author of "A Deaf Adult Speaks Out", and a volunteer in the NAD Headquarters is shown (right foreground) in the audience at the keynote speech.

tapes of a hearing sister signing with her deaf sibling. They were shocked that this sister could sign. They shared that they wished that this would happen in Japan as hearing family members do not learn to sign for their deaf family member. They were also very visible at the presentation given by Dr. Barbara Kannapell on deaf

This is the last Deaf Studies conference being planned by Gallaudet University. All four conferences have been sponsored by Gallaudet, but in response to its Vision Implementation Plan, Gallaudet has so far declined to host another conference. Nonetheless, there was a petition circulated asking Gallaudet to offer Deaf Studies V in San Francisco, CA in 1997.



Projection showing topics at the panel discussion that closed the Deaf Studies IV Conference.



A rapt audience watches speaker during a plenary speech.