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Going back in time: SignWriting

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The SignWriter Newspaper was a 12 to 24 page tabloid-size newspaper, published quarterly from fall 1981 to summer 1984. It was the first newspaper in history to be written in the movements of signed languages. Most articles were written in two languages: English and ASL. Some articles were written in four languages: English, Danish, ASL and Danish Sign Language. Around 11,000 copies were distributed freely to deaf and hearing signers in 41 countries.

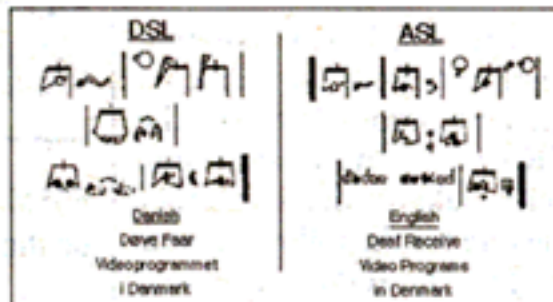
20 years later, in 2004, no one can say that there is not a way to write signs! In 27 countries, small groups of signers have chosen to write their signed languages. It is estimated that thousands of people write daily in SignWriting to express themselves. Some schools teach deaf children to read signs as young as five years old. Some people can type signs, but most still write by hand.

When the SignWriter Newspaper was first pub-

lished in 1981, there was little experience with writing signs. Most signers thought that their language could not be written. Some people were skeptical. Some people experienced fear that writing it could hurt sign language. Some even thought that writing signs would isolate deaf people. All those fears have proved to be false. Deaf people often become inspired to read and write their language when they learn SignWriting and it stimulates them to learn to read and write other languages, such as English. A newly-found pride in one's culture is nurtured, when both signed languages and spoken languages can be written equally, side by side.

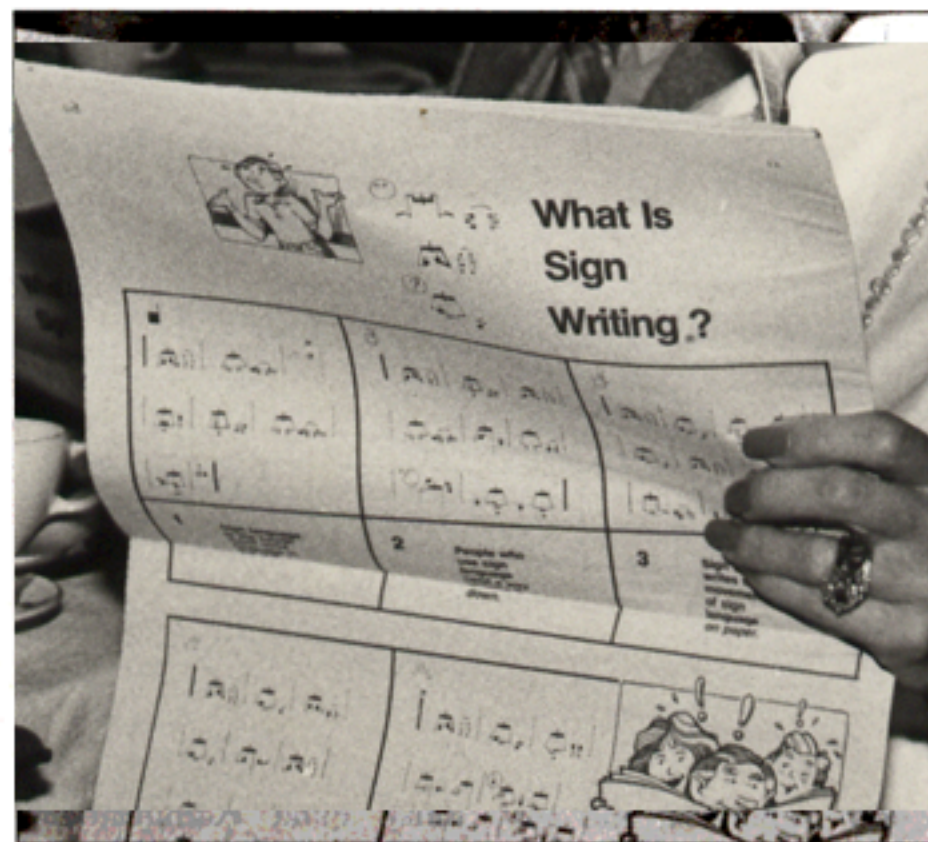
So, if it were not for the research experienced through the publication of the SignWriter Newspaper 20 years ago, deaf children today might not be reading sign language literature in Albuquerque, New Mexico, or Osnabruck, Germany!

The first deaf journalists on the newspaper staff



were the pioneers. They were the first group of deaf adults to become skilled at writing their native signed language. New ideas take time for acceptance, something the staff had no choice but to learn the hard way. But there were many strong supporters of SignWriting too. The newspaper was a catalyst for debating the issue of sign language literacy. It also stimulated the development of the SignWriter computer program, because writing each issue with ink pens was slow and tedious!

Back in 1981, there was no way to type SignWriting. Each issue of the SignWriter Newspaper was written by hand with ink pens or wax symbols were naturally pressed on paper with specially designed 'transfer sheets.' It took three months to write one issue by hand. The first issue was written



by hand by the founding editor, Nancy Ellen Woo (now Nancy Romero). Nancy continued to write each issue by hand for several years. It was tiring, painstaking work. Lucina O'Grady Struxness (now Lucinda Batch) was the first deaf reporter to write articles in ASL. A new profession began called sign language journalism. Other staff members included Kevin Struxness, the late Dennis Schemenauer and the late illustrator Frank Allen Paul.

Publication ceased in 1984 but in 1986, just two years

later, the SignWriter computer program, programmed by Richard Gleaves, changed history. Finally SignWriting could be typed! The SignWriter Newspaper resumed publication as the SignWriter Newsletter in 1989, typed by computer. Issues of the SignWriter Newsletter are posted on the web. The SignWriting website is a popular site, with thousands of web pages, including free lessons, free software downloads and free ASL literature, at www.signwriting.org.