



Lucinda Batch

giving back

Lucinda Batch A Sign Of The Times

Most children growing up in the modern world encounter personal challenges and frustrations, but imagine that you, like Lucinda Batch, are one of three deaf sisters growing up with deaf parents who communicate by using American Sign Language (ASL) - a language with no written form. For a quarter-million North American deaf people whose primary language is ASL, reading a book or magazine in their native language is not an option.

For born-deaf people like Batch to function in a today's world, they must learn to read and write English words - words they have never heard. "Profoundly born-deaf people cannot 'sound-out' words," says Batch. "They must learn to read from rote-memory, without sounds to help them, so learning to lip read English is only possible once you have learned English as a second language."

During our interview, the 48-year-old Batch, who is fluent in English, voices her story for my sake in a faint whisper, while simultaneously using her native language, ASL. Conversely she reads my lips. For a hearing person not familiar with lip reading, the intensity of concentration appears exhausting.

In 1981, Batch worked as a researcher at The Salk Institute in La Jolla, comparing how hearing children and deaf children develop language. Her work led her to Nancy Ellen Woo (now Nancy Romero) who was involved in pioneering a system called SignWriting, a written system for transcribing sign movement. "When I met Nancy Woo," says Batch, "she explained that SignWriting was a nice way to preserve the beautiful native language of the deaf culture. For the first time in our history, ASL users had a writing system that could capture their own poetry, plays, and stories. So I asked her to teach me."

At The Salk Institute, Batch used an English linguistic gloss (a one-word equivalent translation in another language). "The English gloss didn't always give me the equivalent translation I wanted," she says, "so I chose to use SignWriting instead."

Written vertically, SignWriting uses simple geometric icons for hand shapes, location, or direction on the face and movement. The system was founded by Valerie Sutton, a former ballet dancer

who created the Center for Sutton Movement in 1974. Sutton is not deaf, but the system grew out of her invention of how to write body movement on paper, a language she called Dance Writing. The University of Copenhagen requested her to do the same for sign language. "I sat in front of a video machine for three months and was fascinated and put down the signs on paper. That's the way I developed SignWriting."

When Sutton heard that Batch was learning the system, she invited her to be a reporter for her SignWriter Newspaper. "I am very proud to say that I was the first deaf person to write articles in ASL SignWriting," says Batch. "Back then, it was a long process all done by hand. It was an exciting time to be involved on the cutting edge of a process that could change and enhance the lives of many deaf people. I guess you could say we were pioneers struggling to preserve the native language of the deaf culture."

After seven years, Batch and Sutton established the Deaf Action Committee for SignWriting with the purpose of involving more of the deaf community in decisions about recording their native language. For almost a decade, Batch dedicated her time to Sutton's work. The SignWriter Newspaper is now on the World Wide Web, and 40 countries have adopted SignWriting, which is primarily used by the educated deaf, teachers of the deaf and researchers.

"I stopped working when I had my children," says Batch, whose husband and children are not deaf. "I taught my children ASL as babies and kept a SignWriting diary of their funny mistakes, their speech errors. When my son tried to tell me I was in a bad mood, he knew the sign for bad but not for mood so signed moon. The same thing happened when he talked about Sea World. He knew the sign for World but not the sign for Sea so he signed seal. Sometimes they would even make up their own signs, and my ability to accurately capture these touching early moments in my diary is very special to me."

From her office in La Jolla, Sutton says, "Batch and people like her have been profoundly changed by SignWriting. The hearing world can now see that their language is respected and equaled just like any other language in the world."

According to a long-term study by the Gallaudet Research Institute in Washington, before SignWriting, deaf high school seniors scored, on average, just below the fourth-grade level on standard reading tests.

- Ingrid Hoffmeister, photography by Vincent Knakal

[The Center for Sutton Movement Writing was founded in 1976](#)

Current director: founder Valerie Sutton

Mission: To improve literacy levels of the born deaf

Donation administration cost ratio: 0%

Current funding objectives: To pay for computer programmers to continue software development, for teachers to be trained to use software and materials at residential schools for the deaf, and for adults like Batch to develop the reading materials and lessons for deaf children.

Biggest challenge: To raise sufficient funds to support objectives and to continue to provide free educational materials through the SignWriting Literacy Project.

Contact: Valerie Sutton (858/456-0098, sutton@signwriting.org)