

LJ woman develops writing tool for sign language users

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For those gifted with the ability to hear, it is hard to imagine a deaf person's world, in which everyone is eternally lip-synching. There is motion and vibration, but no sound.

Some once had the ability to hear but lost it due to illness or old age, and others are born deaf. These "native signers" use sign language at home as their first language. However, without a codified language, the transition to English can be very difficult, as they have no standard for comparison.

Enter SignWriting — brainchild of former ballet student Valerie Sutton of La Jolla.

SignWriting involves actually writing down the motions used in any particular sign language.

For the first time, deaf people have a written language of their own that then can be fairly readily translated into English or vice versa, she explained.

The concept started back in 1974, and it is now in its 35th year.

Committed to project

"I've made it my life's work," she said in an interview. "I do nothing but [work on] SignWriting all day."

Ironically, SignWriting had its start in a very different area — ballet. At age 15, when studying for professional ballet, Sutton cre-



Valerie Sutton talks about SignWriting at her La Jolla home. SPREEHA DEBCHAUDHURY

ated for her own use a stick-figure writing system that she called DanceWriting. At 19, she moved to Copenhagen, Denmark, to study with professors at the Royal Danish Ballet, where she taught it to many masters in the field.

Her work made its way into the newspapers, and attracted the attention of Lars von der Leith and his team of sign language researchers at the University of Copenhagen, who asked her to write some of the signs from videotapes they had of signers.

Tools available

Now, the SignWriting system has several software programs, an online dictionary, and several works of famous literature translated into SignWriting, a system with thousands of users across the world, constantly

continuing to improve under Ms. Sutton's capable guidance.

"Nobody ever thought it would happen," she said of her invention, "but it did, because I believed in it."

She said she wants to be able to allow born-deaf people from around the world to read and write their own sign language, as one would with English and then have a standard for comparison when they enter the school system.

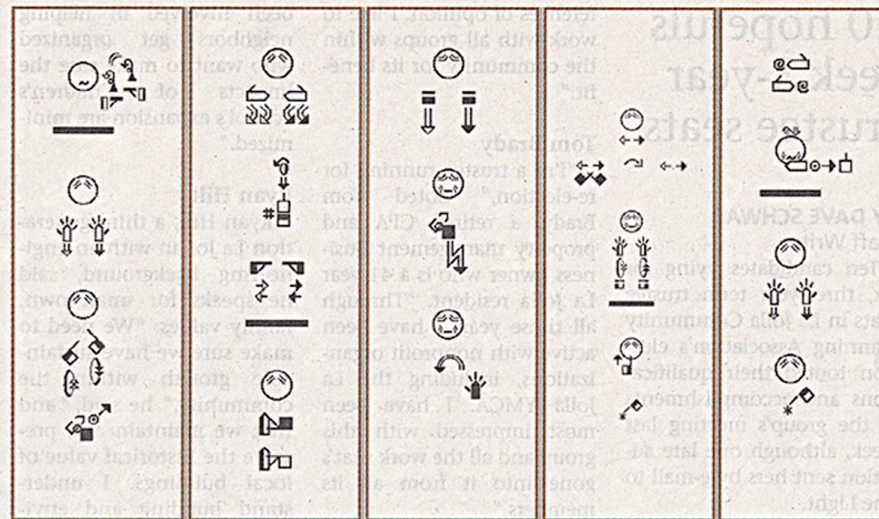
Studies abroad

In a recent study, Dr. Mohammad Abushaira at Jordan University found that students that learned SignWriting did twice as well in tests, etc. at school than those that didn't, according to Sutton's Web site, www.signwriting.org.

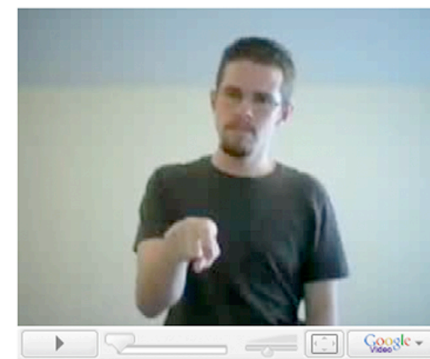
She said she also intends to have more works of literature translated into SignWriting, so that deaf people can have them to read in their own language.

She says the beauty of the system is that it writes motion, so the signs can be mixed and matched to fit all sign languages, much like the letters of the Roman alphabet can fit most languages.

"Most people never thought sign language could be ... written ... but [when people] see a Wikipedia article in SignWriting, it really sinks in that SignWriting has become a true written language," Abushaira said.



A page from 'Why SignWriting?' shows language for deaf people. COURTESY ADAM FROST



Why SignWriting?

Video from a
Deaf Perspective
by Adam Frost

Read the written
American Sign Language
transcript of this video...

Go to:

<http://www.signwriting.org/video/about/>

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