

Deaf Intern Sara Collins Talks about her Experience at Abt Associates

Sara Collins is about to finish her summer internship in the Domestic Health Division (DHD) in Bethesda this week, an end to an assignment that has represented a great milestone in her life. She is completely Deaf, and this is the first time she has ever worked in an all-hearing office environment.

Sara grew up in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. She is the current Student Body Government Vice President of Gallaudet University, a four-year liberal arts university in Washington, DC for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing. She will graduate Gallaudet in May of 2008 with a bachelor's degree in sociology with concentration in criminology. After graduation, she plans to work for a year or two in the DC metropolitan area in government or research, after which she will likely apply to law school.

While participating in the Fannie Mae Foundation Walk for the Homeless last October, Sara met Gail Robinson, vice president, and director of Behavioral Health in DHD. Gail was able to sign fluently with Sara because she has a son who is Deaf. She told Sara about her work at Abt Associates, and both thought an internship would be a great opportunity. Using research skills she learned in her major, Sara has lent her assistance to projects for the Behavioral Health and Health Policy Practices including Partners for Recovery (SAMHSA) and Evaluation of DC Medicaid Managed Care Program (District of Columbia Medical Assistance Administration).

During her third week of work, Sara met fellow intern Jon Johannsson who would be working alongside her in Domestic Health. Jon is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in social policy and social political studies at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. She was pleased to discover that not only would they share an office, but also a common language. Jon has two Deaf sisters and is fluent in American Sign Language. He is able to communicate proficiently with Sara, and at times has helped to facilitate communication with Sara and her coworkers. He and Gail's Deaf son were classmates in preschool.

Being Deaf in an all-hearing workplace

Abt Associates has been Sara's first experience working in an all-hearing office environment. She previously worked at a rehabilitation center, however, she worked mainly with a Deaf client. She has found that many people at Abt Associates have never before communicated with a Deaf person. She thought people seemed a little nervous around her, as they wanted to be polite, but didn't know how to approach a Deaf person. "There are times when I get frustrated due to communication at Abt Associates. Also, there are several misunderstandings that I see some people have about Deaf people," says Sara. One of these misunderstandings is that people assume that Sara can speechread and understand everything with complete accuracy. In reality, she can understand, at best, about half of the conversation through speechreading and as for the remainder of the conversation; she has to fill in the blanks. It is especially tough when people jump from one subject to another without providing context for the next subject. A common misunderstanding that many people have is that talking louder will help her understand better, when in fact it makes speechreading more difficult. On her first day of work at Abt Associates, she had two interpreters accompanying her. Most of the people she encountered had never before interacted with an interpreter. They were not sure who to look at when speaking or when to start and stop speaking. "They didn't know they could address me directly. They were addressing the interpreter by saying 'Tell her...,'" says Sara.

There are many tools that Sara uses to help her to communicate with coworkers. Technology has helped her immensely as she has come to rely on e-mails, instant messaging, and her Blackberry. She also at times has used an IP Relay service which allows her to use the internet to communicate through the telephone system with hearing persons. While in meetings she uses GoToMeeting, a web conferencing

tool recently implemented by IT. For face-to-face conversation, Sara finds carrying a notepad with her to be most effective.

Teaching American Sign Language to Abt Associates staff

Sara has made an additional contribution to the Bethesda office besides her project work. Since July 5th she has been teaching an introductory American Sign Language class twice a week to Abt Associates staff members. She had taught American Sign Language classes previously at the rehabilitation center where she worked. She thought that teaching classes at Abt Associates would be a good way for her coworkers to get to know her better and to learn about Deaf culture and signing. She figured that many people are naturally curious about Deaf people and these classes would be a good way to have their questions answered, while learning how to interact with Deaf people at the same time.

Her approach was to first teach the American Sign Language alphabet and then follow it with common phrases, which she believes is the best way for people to learn, and remember vocabulary. She teaches primarily from an American Sign Language phrase book containing illustrations showing how to sign the words, and supplements the classes with readings about Deaf culture, American Sign Language notes, and Deaf jokes. She finds that the phrase book serves as a good starting point, as it offers common phrases that allow people to

practice on a daily basis. She states, "I don't find showing pictures and words very helpful because while people will learn vocabulary, they are not learning how to apply the vocabulary into a meaningful and everyday manner." She writes notes back and forth with her students and encourages them to look at her to try to understand her gestures. There is a small group of dedicated people that have been attending regularly. Sara believes that as a result of the class, the small group of students are now more comfortable communicating with a Deaf person and more receptive to learning more Sign language in the future. She was even surprised at how well people have adopted the use of facial expressions when they sign, which is the equivalent of using intonation and mood tones in speech. Trudy Perry and Gail Robinson helped to facilitate class enrollment by spreading the word, generating sign-up sheets, and offering the books free to people who could commit to regular attendance.

"Sara volunteered to do the Sign language classes not only as a way for people to learn Sign language but also for her to work as a team and lead people. The people here are very welcoming and see that she is a smart and full person." Gail Robinson

Building confidence and experience

Sara's experience at Abt Associates has taught her that if she had to do it all over again, she would either send out an email or hand out an information sheet in the beginning that has tips for communicating with

"It was a pleasure working with Sara this summer as her supervisor. She is an extremely bright, articulate, and charismatic young woman, and I think that she would agree that this was a mutual learning experience. I guarantee that we will see her again doing 'big things' in our society."

Chanza Baytop, Sara's Intern Supervisor

a Deaf person. Her advice to Deaf people newly entering the general workforce is to always have patience and a positive attitude on the job, even though it can get frustrating at times. To the employees who are a little unsure around a new employee in their office who is Deaf, Sara suggests first of all to relax. She was just as nervous as everyone else was. Also, writing is the easiest and best way to communicate. Lastly, they should know that Deaf people are just like everyone else. Sara affirms that her internship has truly been a very good experience. "Abt Associates boosted my confidence in knowing that I can work alongside hearing people and be just like them. It was

wonderful to work with nice people at Abt Associates who are willing to take the time to try and learn. Being Deaf is who I am and I wouldn't want it to be any other way."



Left to right: Gail Robinson, Jon Johannsson, and Sara Collins