Bridging the Gap between Two Cultures: Hearing and Deaf

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For my take Action Project, I worked to bridge the gap between the approximately five hundred fifty hearing students and forty deaf students in my high school-Mountain Lakes High School. Mountain Lakes is a small town nestled in North Jersey amidst mountains and lakes. It has a population of approximately four thousand five hundred residents and prides itself on the outstanding athletics (especially lacrosse), noted school system, and spectacular beauty. Despite the small size we have one private school, one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. What makes our town special is that we have the Lake Drive School for the hearing impaired and deaf students in town that serves several counties in the state of New Jersey. These forty deaf students attend Lake Drive School until elementary and middle school level, and then come to the high school for higher education.

I wanted to make an impact in my community and chose this project for two reasons. First, I saw a need for this as I befriended a few deaf students in my freshmen year and was not able to comfortably associate my hearing friends with my deaf ones and vice versa. Second, I knew I was the perfect person to initiate this project successfully because of my personal experience and unique abilities.

I was born with a mild to moderate hearing loss in both ears but have been in regular hearing classes all my life. When I entered the school, I met and became friends with some of the deaf students. I quickly realized that many of the deaf students speak (maybe not that well but definitely understandable) and sign, but oddly, my friends never got a chance to realize this due to not being in contact with the deaf students at all. The common misconception is that they cannot speak and
therefore cannot communicate with others effectively. Not only is this concept most certainly not true, their deaf culture is as intense and wholesome as any other culture and has its differences just like every other culture.

Throughout my freshmen year, I noticed that there was a fear for the hearing students to approach the deaf students and vice versa. The deaf students walk the same corridors as hearing students with hardly any interaction confining themselves to only other deaf students. I saw the need for students to be more comfortable around others and be able to interact with each other in any means possible. This is where my take action project began. The summer of my sophomore year, I attended Brown’s summer Leadership and Conflict program, which turned out to be of great assistance during the entire project. Shortly after Brown’s fourteen-day camp ended, I was prompted to pursue the Immerse Yourself into American Sign Language Camp (highest level) for ten days in Gallaudet University (only liberal arts school for the deaf in world). This camp was perfect in giving me the resources of being able to communicate in sign as well considering that it is their primary language that the deaf students use daily during school, but not at home.

First, I had articles published in the school newspaper so more students became aware of the project and the events that they could participate in. Awareness brings interest and knowledge. I also created Prezi presentations for the League of Women Voters about diversity. In addition, I have taken this project as my Girl Scouts Gold Award project and expanded the awareness and sought to involve the girl scouts in the community and make them well aware of the need for such interaction.
I arranged a tour of the Lake Drive School for the middle school girl scouts, which is almost one-third of their student body. I asked one of my hearing friends (who took sign language as an elective with me my freshmen year and had broken the barrier with the deaf students and two of my deaf friends) to help me with the tour. My friends and I spent the time to prepare material and an agenda for a concise and productive tour. The four of us split the group taking the girls on the tour of the classes for the deaf as well as some exposure to deaf culture and a hint of insightful personal experience from my deaf friends who grew up in the Lake Drive School. I believe this tour enabled the middle school hearing students to be more aware of the deaf culture and become more comfortable with deaf students. This also allowed them to lose the fear and inhibitions of saying the wrong things once they have had mutual acquaintance. Most importantly, this prepared them for high school interaction. The tour was a success; the hardest part of the process was arranging times and communicating with multiple groups of people. After significant challenges with arrangements and permission slips, the initial tour date was cancelled due to a snowstorm. Subsequent dates were difficult due to sports and music recital conflicts. However, we made small group tours on separate days and everyone was on board. Thanks to the Brown summer program Leadership and Conflict, I was able to resolve issues effectively and lead successful tours.

I strengthened and revived the subdivision of Lake Drive Outreach in the Key Club with my ideas for the take action project. Together with the members in that division as well as the Jr. National Association of the Deaf (consists of the deaf students who organize events for the deaf) we made arrangements for brunches, games and activities in the gym and social interactive sessions between the deaf and hearing students in the high school. The purpose of hosting these programs was to reduce the initial stigma that is present between any encounter of
two individuals and is even more present between two cultures. The project culminated with a mural designed and painted by the deaf and hearing students over several weeks during free periods. We had a great turnout and students smiled, chatted and interacted in their own ways without language barriers.

I successfully completed my project (from the summer of my sophomore year 2012 to the early summer after junior year 2014) and implemented means for continued sustenance after my departure from school.

I have presented the final report to the Girl Scouts of Northern New Jersey and was accepted and awarded the gold award. They have liked the project and asked me to display it at the annual volunteer recognition dinner. That brought more awareness beyond the community. I believe it is a success. As part of ongoing efforts, I have been the secretary for the Key Club and made the Lake Drive outreach Division more active with frequent activities hosted between two groups.

Unlike many high schools, sign language is offered at the high school and it remains a popular class taken as an elective by high school students. Given that many hearing students take this class, that knowledge was adequate for communication with deaf students and the others who were hearing impaired and speak. Once they got to know each other in the various activities, communication was easy, and the fear of how to communicate with each other was lost and more smiles evolved.

A major part of the sustenance involved the sign language classes, which was a perfect way to get the very interested students to be part of this project. I have worked with the principals and the superintendent of the Mountain Lakes school district in successfully implementing a mentorship program in the high
school. This entails high school students who take the sign language participate in a mentorship as part of the curriculum. They go to the Lake Drive School and mentor Lake Drive elementary students one on one for few days during their course year. This also helps sign language students practice their sign skills, learn about the deaf culture, and experience the difficulties hearing impairment poses in learning. The Lake Drive elementary students benefit from the high school students who work with them one on one mentoring objectives; one on one instruction benefits students with learning disabilities in general.

Overall, the school newspaper, the Girl Scouts organization, Key Club, Leaders program at the local YMCA have all been ways and means of advertising all the activities I have organized for this goal and were very effective. I have had the help of various Girl Scout troop leaders, sign language teachers, three school principals, the art club, art teacher, the superintendent and above all, my project advisor Mrs. Patricia McElduff (runs the Key Club at MLHS) who guided me throughout the process all the way to successful completion.

The leadership institute at Brown instilled the skills to successfully negotiate, resolve conflicts during these arrangements with multiple different departments, and to work out the plan despite several setbacks. In the end, the take action plan and project was completed, successful, and created a lasting impact.

Here is the link to view pictures of the very successful turnout for the mural where many hearing and deaf individuals worked together to produce a wonderful mural that will permanently hang in the school as a reminder of the success of bridging the gap between the two groups:

https://plus.google.com/photos/104598877593423676039/albums/5963362216972192225?authkey=CLDV3-bm8ufPQ
Here is the link to a Prezi Presentation that was presented to different groups of people to advocate acceptance and appreciation of diversity as a school wide initiative and made people aware of the beauty of diversity and uniqueness: http://prezi.com/byelei8_uikr/diversity/

Here is a picture of the finished mural: