



Sybill Ulrike: Immigrant, lesbian and deaf psychologist bridges cultures to open doors for the disabled

SAN FRANCISCO, FEB. 8, 2007 -- Sybille Ulrike, a German immigrant who has been deaf from birth, is already on the job at San Jose State University (SJSU), working as a psychology intern, serving 20 hard-of-hearing and deaf students. Her work at SJSU is a field placement that is an integral part of her studies at here at Alliant International University, a non-profit graduate university here in San Francisco. Sybille is in her fifth year of a PsyD doctoral program at Alliant's California School of Professional Psychology (CSPP).

When she graduates, she will become the 26th deaf psychologist in US history (the other 25 are not all still living). Sybille's doctoral dissertation, which examines the experience of deaf women in prison – women who live in silence akin to solitary confinement - will be the first ever conducted in American Sign Language (ASL). Sybil used ASL to interview the women, who have no one around who speaks their language.

Sybille was born in Germany to hearing parents and attended schools for the deaf as well as “oral schools” designed for hearing students, has brought with her a desire to learn and serve her community. She has been “mainstreamed” for nearly all of her educational schools, attending schools for the hearing rather than the deaf. Alliant International University considers it something of a triumph that she is getting her doctorate here – from a “hearing” school that affirms the need to prepare professionals that understand and reflect the diversity of San Francisco and the State of California – rather than from a specialized university like Galludet.

Through her studies at first Alliant International University's Alameda Campus and then Alliant's new San Francisco Campus, Sybille Ulrike has been a teacher as well as a student. She has worked as the assistant to Alliant Office of Disability Services and taught a class in American Sign Language (ASL), one of several languages she speaks. Sybille is fluent in German, English, German Sign Language and International Sign Language, as well as ASL. It was through those classes that Sybille met and married her lesbian partner.

While attending classes and working, Sybille is almost always in the company of interpreters for the deaf. The interpreter – considered a “reasonable accommodation” under the terms of the Americans with Disabilities Act, a landmark piece of civil rights legislation passed in 1990 – helps facilitate training at her internship and assists Sybille to collaborate with both colleagues and hearing clients.

Because of Sybille's presence on the campus, Alliant faculty, students and staff have not only been offered the chance to learn ASL, they have also had an opportunity to experience firsthand how to be in relationship with person who perceives the world differently – a key skill for professionals. Since more than ten percent of the US population has a hearing loss, almost everyone will, at some time, serve hard-of-hearing or deaf clients.

Dr. Nina Ghiselli, Systemwide Director of Disability Services states, “Increasing access to students with disabilities is not only a legal obligation, but also a part of our mission. By making our programs accessible, we can increase the representation of those with disabilities in the psychology profession. This, in turn, means that clients with disabilities will have a better chance of being served by appropriately trained clinicians who have shared their personal experiences. I am proud of Sybille for her achievements, but I’m also proud of Alliant for committing to accessibility at all levels of its training.”

Sybille will be presenting her dissertation research at a national conference this spring, along with an Alliant faculty member, Dr. Rhoda Olkin, also a disability access advocate. Sybille’s dissertation found that because of a dearth of supports for deafness and a lack of shared language, deaf prisoners experience extreme isolation. One of Sybille’s research questions compares the isolation deaf prisoners feel to the experience that hearing prisoners have in solitary confinement.

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