

DEAF AWARENESS DAY

"You don't have to hear in order
To listen"

You don't have to hear

Lesego Modutle

GROWING up, I was a very curious girl, always asking "Why?" and wanting to know "How?" When my parents watched the news I would stare at the sign language interpreter, trying to figure out why there was a small person in the corner of the television waving their hands.

I was told they were "speaking to deaf people." My next question was, "How do deaf people make sense of waving hands?"

Unfortunately, nobody could answer, because the people I was asking were all hearing people who knew nothing about deaf people and their culture, let alone sign language.

It was only when I enrolled at the University of the Free State that my question was answered, because it offered a sign language course, for which I signed up immediately.

Today I am employed as UCT's very first full-time SA sign language interpreter, on staff with UCT's Disability Services. It was never my inten-



tion to become an interpreter – my dream has always been to be an actress – but once I realised what a huge shortage of sign language interpreters there are in SA, I knew I had to answer my calling.

I had learnt sign language merely out of curiosity – I have no deaf family members and was never exposed to deaf people before my varsity years – but once I became involved in the deaf community, I never looked back.

Deaf people are the most

welcoming, patient, kind-hearted people I have ever had the pleasure of working and socialising with.

They have an amazing culture and are the personification of ubuntu. Because of the shortage of sign language interpreters in SA, deaf people are often excluded from the mass communication of important messages – but should one deaf person receive that information, it will spread throughout the deaf community, keeping deaf people informed of important day-to-day events.

I was very chuffed when UCT accepted its first profoundly deaf student, Robyn Swannack, this year.

I am honoured to be her interpreter and have grown extremely fond of her.

Deaf people make it very easy to like them: they are always smiling, very welcoming and they love to socialise. So it is sad how they are so often ignored and oppressed.

There is a sizeable career gap in the sign language world. Interpreters are needed in all fields: hospitals, clinics, courts,

banks, educational institutions... everywhere! Imagine going to the bank and standing in a long queue, only to be sent home because nobody can make out what you want. Or trying to get over-the-counter service at a shop and then having to leave empty-handed. These are errands that hearing people take for granted, but to a deaf person it's a daily frustration. The ideal situation would be if everybody learnt to sign, especially teachers who work in the schools for deaf people, but until then let's work on getting more sign language interpreters.

If you know of someone who is deaf, ask them to teach you sign language. Or if you know of any sign language classes in your area, sign yourself on. Who knows – maybe you have a hidden skill for sign language interpreting... and then you too can make a difference.

● Robyn Swannack of Durban and David Silva of Johannesburg are students at UCT. Lesego Modutle is a sign language interpreter in the Disability Services at UCT.