

Living with deafness: a 'vocation,' not a disability

By Victor J. Bartolotta Jr.

Sharon McKenney-Dutille writes upside down, and you have to hold what she has written up to a mirror to find out what it says. She can also face you and write backwards so that you can read it.

In high school, like many students who find themselves unable to begin a writing assignment, she once warmed up by writing a complete essay from right to left and mirror-backwards; then, she quickly rewrote the essay the correct way so that her mother wouldn't see it.

McKenney-Dutille, who earned a bachelor's degree in fine and applied art from Rochester Institute of Technology, is an accomplished illustrator. She also works as a teaching assistant at Trinity Montessori School in Pittsford.

Ray Fleming is a priest. When he and Deacon Patrick Graybill lead the congregation in the basement of St. Mary's Church on Sunday, you can sometimes hear a pin drop. But the silence doesn't seem to detract from the movement of the Spirit or the friendly character of the parish.

Frank Kimmes works at Kodak as a drill press operator, a position he's held for 14 years. He worked previously at Westinghouse in Niagara Falls. After being laid off, Kimmes spent two years looking for a job.

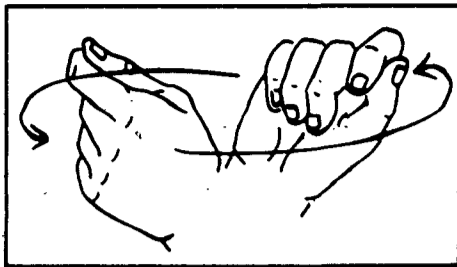
Kimmes was repeatedly turned down by potential employers for one reason. Like Sharon McKenney-Dutille and Father Ray Fleming, Frank Kimmes is deaf.

When Kimmes finally applied at Kodak, he informed the personnel department at the outset that he was deaf. Unlike many other employers to whom Kimmes had applied, Kodak officials told him they didn't care if he was deaf. They wanted to know what skills he had.

Kimmes has worked at Kodak ever since. Over the years, the job has supported his wife, who is also deaf, and his two sons, both of whom are hearing.

For Frank Kimmes, for Sharon McKenney-Dutille, and for Father Ray Fleming, deafness is not a disability.

"People who want to focus on the fact that I have a hearing problem say that I am hard of hearing or that I have a hearing impairment; or they talk about my 'handicap,'" says Father Fleming. "But being deaf



Change, adjust, adapt

means being part of a community, a culture with a different value system ... rather than something that's wrong with me."

For Frank Kimmes, being deaf means accepting a vocation from God. "God gives me my deafness and I am happy," says Kimmes, who adds that he would not choose a life of improved hearing even if it were offered him.

Early experiences

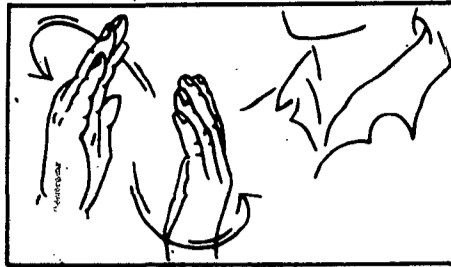
Growing up deaf in a hearing world can be a painful process. Among hearing people, a general awareness of deafness — and sensitivity to the special problems and triumphs of deaf people — are fairly recent phenomena. In the past, for example, a family into which a deaf child was born was considered cursed instead of blessed.

Sharon McKenney-Dutille recalls that it was not until she was in the first grade that the adult world even recognized that she had a hearing problem. Instead of making possible an easier or more understanding environment, the acknowledgement by others of her deafness meant a continuation of difficulty, prejudice and hardship.

With the exception of one year spent in Philadelphia in a school for the deaf, McKenney-Dutille's elementary and secondary school education took place in a hearing environment.

Initially, such "mainstreaming" invited embarrassment. In class, McKenney-Dutille was forced to sit where she did not want to. "I had to sit in the front row in the middle of the class," she recalls, "smack in front of the teacher's face" — presumably to allow her to lip-read every word the teacher said.

Because her school system emphasized the importance of speaking clearly and correctly, McKenney-Dutille was required to take speech lessons once a week. This meant



Become, grow, get

having to leave a class only 15 minutes after it began, so she could meet with the speech teacher; it also meant missed instructional time and private tutoring after school.

"We missed so much trying to be perfect," says McKenney-Dutille, who adds that the educational system had the effect of making her more like her classmates, rather than allowing her to develop her talents and abilities in her own way.

McKenney-Dutille felt stifled by the academic difficulty she encountered, in an insensitive school system bent on imposing the rules and values of the hearing world. The ridicule she endured from insensitive schoolmates, however, was infinitely worse.

Now an attractive woman at 34, McKenney-Dutille remembers "being the unpopular kid in school" because she was "different" and also because she had to wear an unwieldy hearing apparatus with wires protruding from each ear.

For a boy, the hearing box connected to the aid was awkward, but fit reasonably well in the front pocket of his shirt. The device, however, presented a different sort of problem for a girl. When she was younger, it usually meant wearing the box strapped under her blouse; later, when she grew older, the infernal contraption would fit only in the front part of her bra. McKenney-Dutille remembers being teased about having three breasts.

For Father Fleming, deafness also meant trying to avoid being different. Like McKenney-Dutille, Father Fleming attended primary and secondary schools in a hearing environment. In an attempt to fit in with his classmates, he joined the school's football team for a year.

Father Fleming remembers eventually being forced to quit because his hearing device became too expensive to continue repairing. Understanding the plays given in the huddle was also a nearly impossible task.

Nevertheless, Father Fleming continued to try to make it socially. "I played the clarinet in the high school band," he says, "even though I couldn't hear half the notes."

Eventually, Father Fleming said he stopped being foolish and "trying to fit in and be like everyone else." Perhaps this was his own way of admitting that he was unique.

College and beyond

For both Father Fleming and Sharon McKenney-Dutille, college presented an unprecedented opportunity. For the first time, says McKenney-Dutille, "there were other people like me." Similarly, Father Fleming first learned to use sign language at Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C.

Both were thankful for the camaraderie they experienced in college. Afterward, however, discrimination on the part of ignorant or insensitive people didn't end.

After graduation, unable to find a job in her field, McKenney-Dutille took a job as a grocery-store checkout clerk. After a short time, however, not realizing that she was deaf customers started to complain that she was unfriendly.

Unlike the other checkout clerks, McKenney-Dutille could not listen to customers talking to her and keep an eye on the cash register keys. Despite her pleasant personality, her college degree and her affinity for people, McKenney-Dutille was transferred to the stock room.

Finally, she landed a job as a communications designer with Computer Consoles, Inc., where she worked for several years before taking her current position at Trinity Montessori School.

Father Fleming, meanwhile, finished his bachelor's degree and began preparation for the priesthood at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. At the time, he was studying with a religious community.

He later left the seminary and joined a traveling theater company for a few years before applying to the Diocese of Rochester. Before St. Bernard's Institute moved to the site of the divinity schools on South Goodman Street, Father Fleming graduated from the seminary and was ordained in 1981. He has found the diocese to be an open and welcome place for deaf people.

For the hearing world

"Hearing people" often emphasize what
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