

1. Do you think this article is relevant to our school environment? Explain

2. How would other teens benefit from reading this article?

3. How can we improve communication skills with different groups at Horn Lake High?

Teens learn sign language to communicate with classmate

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Inspire Atlanta By Nancy Badertscher , For the AJC

At DeKalb Early College Academy, one student has inspired some of his classmates to learn his language: sign language.

Until this year, student Osman Mohamed, who has been deaf since he was an infant, could rarely communicate with his teachers and fellow students except through an interpreter.

Some of his classmates weren't too happy about that.

"As a teenager, we don't always want to have an adult in the conversation," said 10th grader Braxton Broady, whose mother is a reporter for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Osman's interpreter, Cecilia Forbes, stepped up to help. She started an American Sign Language club at the Stone Mountain school where ambitious students can graduate with a high school diploma and a two-year college degree.

About 20 of Osman's classmates – including Braxton – joined the club, which has been meeting weekly since the start of the current school year.

Already, it's been a win-win, especially for Osman, the school's first deaf student.

"It's changed my life," he said through an interpreter.

Osman said he was lonely in ninth grade, with only his interpreter to talk to. He couldn't turn to his classmates with questions. Nor did he have anyone at school with whom he could commiserate about the trials and tribulations of teen life, he said.

As Osman's classmates began learning how to sign, Forbes and others saw a noticeable difference in the 10th grader.

Osman used to eat lunch in the cafeteria and then head to the interpreter's office for the rest of the period. Now, at least once a week, he hangs back to socialize with the other students, Forbes said.

English language arts teacher Anne Postema said Osman is a "bright," "quick-thinking" and fun-loving student whose academic abilities aren't slowed by his hearing impairment.

"The only area I was concerned about was his relationships with fellow classmates because his conversations are always filtered through his adult interpreters," Postema said. "He didn't seem to understand how to reach out to students and just chat, nor was he inclined to do so."

Once Osman's classmates attended at least one meeting of the American Sign Languages Club, he appeared more comfortable with both the students and teacher.

"As a result, our class is much more friendly for everyone, which is the kind of learning environment that I like and is one where students can be successful academically and socially," Postema said.

Osman's classmates are excited to be able to communicate directly with him.

"They smile and laugh while they try to use the sign language they have learned and seek his approval and correction when they aren't quite right," his teacher said.

Osman laughs and smiles back, she said.

Club members have some of the basics down. They can ask and answer in sign: How are you? How was your vacation? What's your favorite class? Thank you, and more.

"We are all beginners, so our fluency isn't great," Braxton said.

But practicing has helped. Club members have signed ordering food from a restaurant, placing fake FaceTime calls, and even listening to the lyrics to some of their favorite songs.

"They are picking it up pretty quickly," Forbes said. "But these are highly motivated, very smart kids."

About a dozen of the students were confident enough in their abilities to both sing and sign a couple of songs in December at the school's Christmas program.

Osman said some of his classmates have been such quick studies that it seems like "they already knew [how to sign] or already had it in them."

Asked if he were a teacher, what grade he would give them on their signing abilities, Osman laughed. Then he decided he'd give them an A, even though "some are better than others."

Fellow 10th grader and club member Sydnie Hicks said: "Sign language is a beautiful language, and I really wanted to be able to understand it and be able to communicate with deaf people, such as Osman."

Before she joined the club, she said, she could do little more than say hello to Osman without the help of an interpreter.

"Now, I can ask a few questions, understand his answers, and actually have a conversation with him," Sydnie said. "I think he is happy that people are taking an interest in his language and trying to be able to converse with him."

Michael Costa, an assistant principal at the academy, believes the signing club and Osman have had a broad impact.

"It's helping to break those barriers down for everyone involved, even us adults."

Costa said he's hoping Osman's story will encourage other special needs students to apply to the school.

Osman, meanwhile, has big plans. In the summer, he'll attend Georgia Perimeter College to complete his dual enrollment. Later, he's hoping to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and major in software engineering.

Source: AJC

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