

Friends of Libraries for Deaf Action (FOLDA)

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Testimony
Ohio Deaf History Month
In support of SB 27
February 28, 2017

Senator Dave Burke, Chairman of Health, Human Services, and Medicaid Committee

Senator Bill Beagle
Ethan Zucal, Legislative aide

My name is Alice L. Hagemeyer.

I am the founding president of the Friends of Libraries for Deaf Action (FOLDA), established in 1986.

Our mission is to promote library access and quality resources for the deaf as well as for the public about deaf cultures and library services to the deaf nationally and globally.

When I worked at the DC Public Library in 1974, my coworker and I volunteered to teach sign language classes to the library staff. We did not have books on our library shelves that would encourage our students to read about the deaf experience and history. As a volunteer teacher, I did not even know if there were such books on the market. All the books we found on the public library shelves or in bookstores were mostly focused on sign language and education for children.

Public librarians were not able to get help from the American Library Association (ALA) for a recommended list of books for the public library. A formal unit for the deaf within its structure did not exist until five years later.

I did seek help from Gallaudet College (now University) and the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). There was nothing about deaf history on the market that I knew would inspire the general reader.

At that time, I studied for my masters in library and information science (MILS) at the University of MD. Almost all my hearing classmates had never met a deaf person before and some were surprised that I could drive a car or have a baby. There were also many questions that I could not answer positively about hearing loss or deaf problems related to speech and reading. None of them understood that there were already deaf cultures and history, and that I did not want anyone to cure my deafness.

At the advice and support of my college advisor, I worked on a project called "Deaf Awareness Handbook for Public Librarians." While doing the study, I learned a lot about myself as a deaf person and as a child of hearing parents who, unbeknownst to me, had struggled to accept my deafness and wanted to find a cure. I also finally found the real reason why deaf children like myself had never been allowed to use sign language in classrooms and no deaf people were hired as teachers.

In 1975, I completed my book project, and a year later I received my masters and got a job as Librarian for the Deaf – the first of its kind – and joined the ALA.

The DC Public Library published my book project for free distribution to all State Libraries and public library systems that did not have services to the deaf. And we also encouraged them to observe Deaf Awareness Week in which my sign language class originated in December 1974. At the D.C. Public Library, we sponsored many free Deaf Awareness activities and Annual Deaf Events all year round where both deaf and hearing patrons could participate in and share their cultural experience.

Public Libraries in most states were also interested in what we did at the DC Public Library but library staff did not understand why local people or local organizations that serve the deaf did not show their interest to be involved. Librarians reluctantly gave up.

It was not until the year 1981 when the first ever book written by a deaf author, Jack R. Gannon, called “Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America” was published that everything changed. Since this publication, we have seen the growth of books about deaf experience on public library shelves. And the deaf became more aware of local public library services.

But unfortunately, due to various reasons, most public libraries do not have quality resources to help promote public awareness of deaf contributions to America like they do for Blacks, Hispanics, LGBT, Woman, Asians and others when observing their annual events as proclaimed by the US President or the Governor.

In 2006, the NAD and ALA endorsed March 13 – April 15 as National Deaf History Month to recognize the three important deaf dates in the history of America: March 13, 1988 (the first victory of Deaf Civil Rights); April 8, 1964 (the first and only liberal arts college for the deaf established); and April 15, 1817 (the first public school for the Deaf in America opened)

For some reason, both the deaf and library communities are still waiting for the NAD to move on with its mandated month for the US Congress bill to be signed so that the US President could proclaim March 13 – April 15 as National Deaf History Month.

Ohio is the state where many national historical events first happened, from the founding of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) in Cincinnati (1880) to the US Deaf Sports Federation (USDSF) in Akron (1945). The first NAD president elected was Robert McGregor, a deaf teacher in Ohio and the founder of USDSF was Art A. Kruger of Akron.

On behalf of Ohio’s libraries and the people of Ohio on their need to recognize the many valuable contributions that the deaf had made for over 100 years to America and Ohio, I urge the committee to support Bill SB 47. Thank you.

Alice L. Hagemeyer, MLIS

*Honorary member of the American Library Association

*One of the 15 visionary leaders selected by Gallaudet University on its 150th anniversary in 2014.

*Creator of the Two Series: Bridging Deaf Cultures @ your library and I Made America Great.