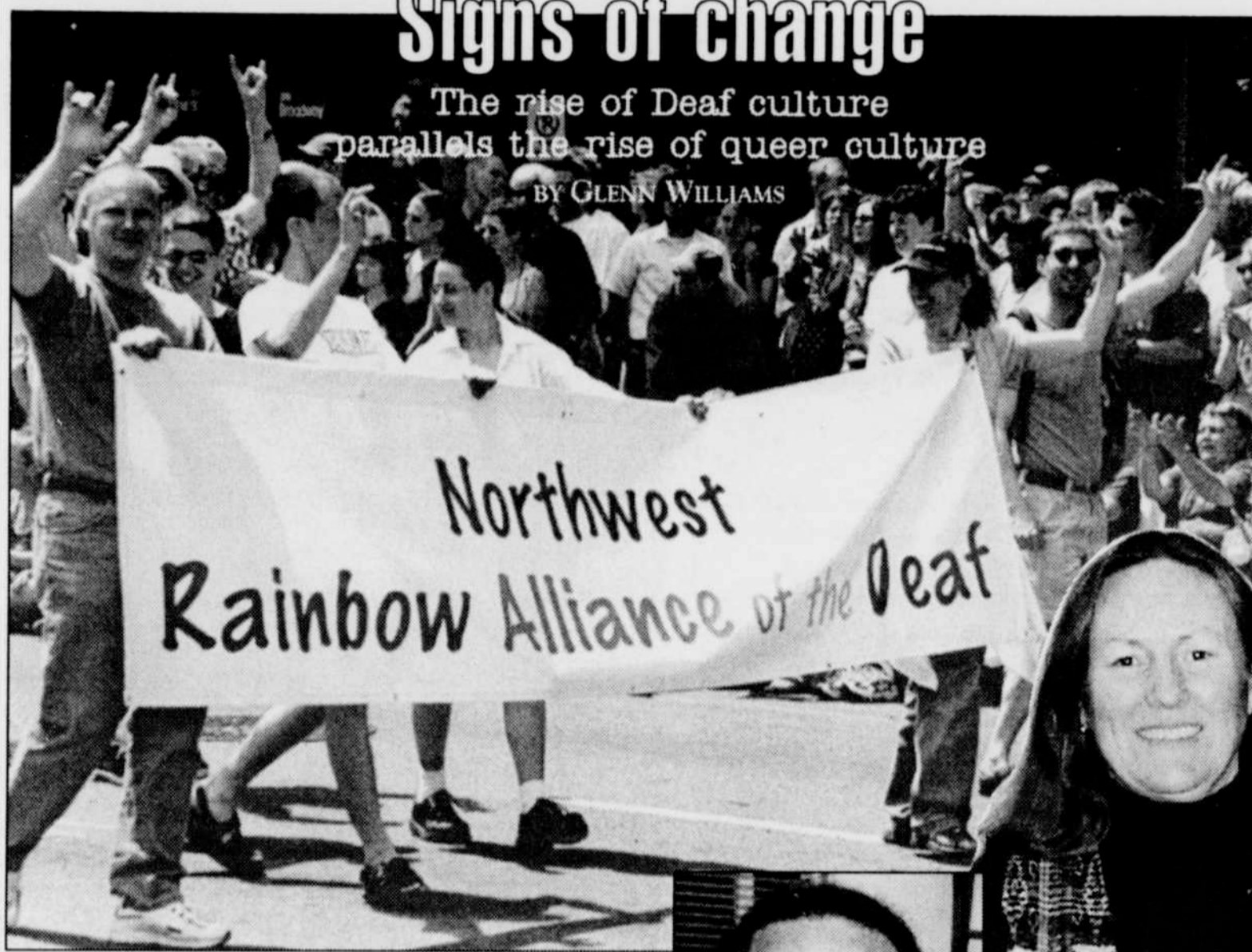


CULTURE

# Signs of change

The rise of Deaf culture parallels the rise of queer culture

BY GLENN WILLIAMS



A sign of Pride 2000

It's hard to imagine by today's standards that there once was a time when Deaf people were perceived in the United States as mentally and physically deficient. Many intelligent, articulate Deaf people, including children, were locked in mental institutions for life simply because they could not hear.

In mainstream schools and institutions, Deaf people were severely punished for communicating in sign language and often had their hands tied to prevent them doing so. The label "deaf and dumb" commonly was used—not so much because of its archaic meaning but because of resounding prejudice and ignorance.

Forced underground, Deaf people began to develop an intricate and unique culture with their own language, traditions, art forms, idioms and stories. This culture flourished in bars, clubs and schools throughout the United States—pockets of freedom in a sea of misunderstanding and bigotry. Greatly influenced by French forms of sign language that had developed during the 19th century, American Sign Language evolved into a complex visual language complete with its own syntax, grammar and vocabulary.

As this culture grew behind the scenes, mainstream society continued to harass, discriminate against and, perhaps worst of all, pity Deaf people. Finally tired of their second-class status and lack of liberty, Deaf people began to rise up and rebel.

In 1988, Gallaudet University, the premier Deaf liberal arts college in the United States and ground zero for Deaf culture, chose for its new president the only hearing person of the three final candidates. Students and other Deaf people protested, eventually shutting down the school, until the board caved and elected a Deaf president. This was a turning point for the Deaf rights movement—a movement that continues to gain ground and attention to this day.

Does any of this sound familiar? It should.

The story of the rise of Deaf culture is similar to that of queer culture: oppression by the mainstream, a developing underground culture, a pivotal protest (Gallaudet for Deaf people, Stonewall for queer people) and a growing, outward-radiating civil rights movement. In this sense, Deaf people and queer people have much in common. Deaf people were instrumental in the creation of the Americans with Disabilities Act, while queer people have been instrumental in the political actions that have improved the lives and free-

doms of gay, lesbian, bi and trans people.

What exactly makes up Deaf culture? Deaf people have their own churches, schools and clubs, their own specific and unique codes of etiquette and their own jokes and rhetorical constructions.

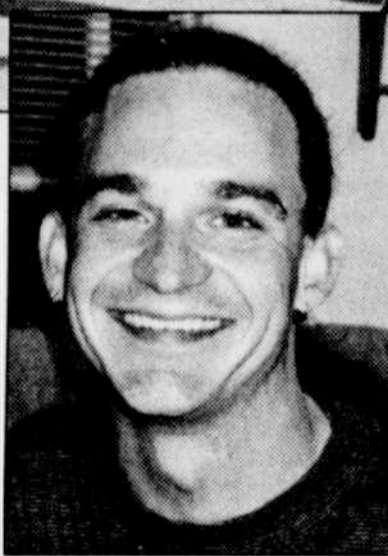
Deaf people maintain that the word "Deaf" should be capitalized to connote a cultural distinction as opposed to merely an auditory condition. But most importantly, the culture is defined by the predominant use of American Sign Language among its members.

"Just for your information," says Debi Duren, a culturally active Deaf lesbian from Portland, "English is my second language, and I prefer to communicate in ASL as my primary language."

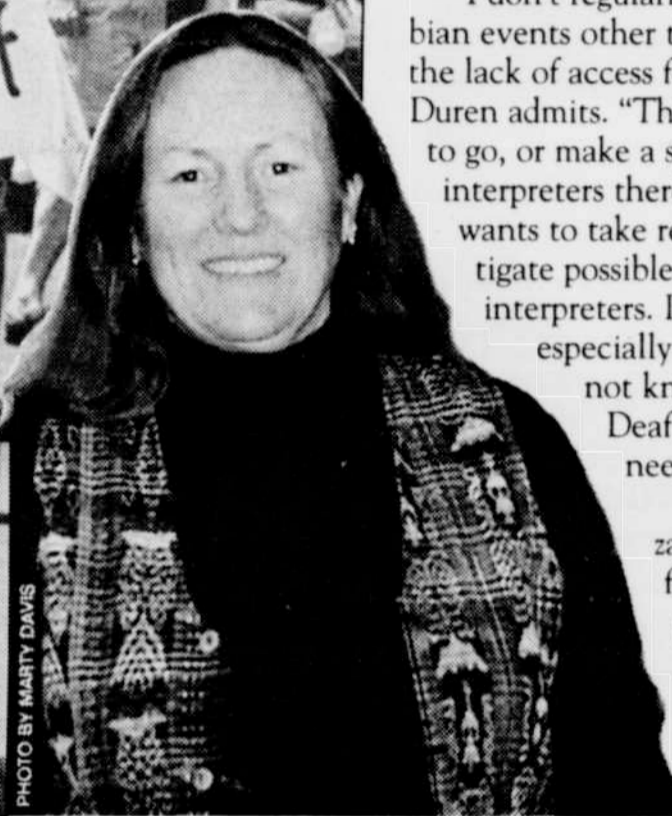
Duren is not alone. More than 1 million Deaf people consider their primary common language to be ASL, which is actually the third most used language in the United States.

American Sign Language is not merely English translated into signs; it has been documented and recognized by linguists as having its own individual language, as separate from English as English is from Spanish. Says Tim Amundson, a Deaf gay Portland man, "Deafies have a huge different culture because of our American Sign Language."

As Duren and Amundson remind us, Deaf culture and queer culture are, happily, not mutually exclusive. A good percentage of hearing people



Todd Agan



Debi Duren

are gay, and the same goes for Deaf people. Todd Agan, a gay sign interpreter from Salem, points out, "There seems to be about the same ratio between straight and gay hearing people as there are straight and gay Deaf people."

Amundson, who was born Deaf, began at the age of 9 or 10 to feel a "lot of chemistry with boys, though I did not know what 'homosexual' or 'gay' was." Just like hearing queer youth, he not only had to come to terms with the nature of his instincts but with the language as well.

"When I was about 12 years old, I asked one of my teachers to give me the sign for a boy who likes boys," Amundson recalls. "He responded to me clearly: 'It is called a homosexual. It means a boy who likes boys.' Then I knew I was first Deaf, then gay second."

A Deaf queer subculture has formed across the nation, bringing the oppressed within the oppressed together for mutual support and understanding. Even in the Pacific Northwest, Deaf queers abound and are beginning to find their own visibility.

In 1981, Amundson, with his friends Daniel Mansfield and Steve Niven, saw the need for a mutual support network for Deaf queers in the area. That year, they invited interested people to meet at Mansfield's cabin in LaConner, Wash. A total of 25 Deaf queers showed up, and the Northwest Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf was born.

"At first, building our members and the organization was pretty tough," Amundson recalls. "But we made it all right. Right now we have over 100 members."

But which community do Deaf queers identify with more? "I feel connected to both the Deaf community and the lesbian community," says Duren, NWRAD secretary. "However, I'm leaning toward [feeling more comfortable with] the Deaf gay and lesbian community because I

am Deaf and a lesbian at the same time. So I have this unique bond with other Deaf gays and lesbians."

Agan adds, "Deaf culture seems to be a very accepting culture, because they know what it is like to be oppressed." So one would think queers, being the victims of mainstream bias themselves, in general would understand and support the Deaf queer subculture.

But this is not always the case. Many queer organizations still lack accessibility for Deaf people, and queer events are often inaccessible to Deaf queers.

"I don't regularly attend gay and lesbian events other than NWRAD due to the lack of access for interpreters," Duren admits. "The reason I tend not to go, or make a special effort to have interpreters there, is that no one wants to take responsibility to investigate possible funds to pay for interpreters. It's understandable, especially because they may not know anything about Deaf people and their needs."

Many queer organizations, strapped for funds to pay for interpreters but wanting to reach out to Deaf queers, rely on the volunteer efforts of overworked, understaffed area interpreters.

"I have the best job in the world," says Agan, who recognizes the slim resources available for Deaf queer access. "I do a lot of pro bono work in the queer community, because they are my community. I volunteer for Peacock in the Park, Basic Rights Oregon and Human Rights Campaign events and Pride."

But many smaller queer organizations remain without Deaf representation, and understanding between the hearing queer and Deaf queer communities is growing slowly.

Yet sometimes the bottom falls out. On Sept. 28, Eric Plunkett, a 19-year-old Deaf gay Gallaudet freshman, was brutally murdered in his dorm room.

Police have yet to find the killer, but they are convinced it was someone inside the school. The *Advocate* reports Thomas Green, Lambda Society president, saw a Deaf student at Gallaudet sign to another student, "Oh, good, one less [gay person]."

"Historically, Deaf people, both straight and gay/lesbian, have been fighting for their rights and to make themselves visible," Duren says. "If there were more opportunities for Deaf gays and lesbians and hearing gays and lesbians to get together and talk about this issue, then there would be more respect and understanding for each other equally."

Signs of change are coming slowly but surely. "There are a lot of hearing people who accept us," Amundson says. "We make a lot of friends and teach them something in sign language. The hearing people who understand us are quite well-educated!"

Like other hearing people, many queers slowly are welcoming Deaf queers to the table. Duren wistfully shares her dream: "To regard us—Deaf gays and lesbians—as equals! The only difference between us is communication mode. That's all!"

GLENN WILLIAMS is a hearing writer from Portland (we all can't be perfect) who has studied sign language, has directed interpreters into theater productions and who signs horribly but with gusto.

## Northwest Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf

Deaf queer culture is on the rise. Looking for a place to experience it?

The Northwest Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf supports Oregon and Washington Deaf queers by playing host to special events and educational workshops. The organization generates newsletters, maintains a Web site and holds large general meetings three times a year and social gatherings every month.

NWRAD is a member of Deaf Gays & Lesbians of the West and of the Greater Seattle Business Association, a gay chamber of commerce. Last April, Canadian mem-

bers created a British Columbia chapter.

NWRAD is playing host to the Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf's national conference from July 3 to 7, 2001, in Seattle. "Facing Tomorrow: Breaking New Ground" will feature workshops and seminars on topics of interest to Deaf, Deaf-Blind and Hard of Hearing gay, lesbian, bi and trans people across the country.

All Deaf queers are welcome to sign up. For more information, write to P.O. Box 94116, Seattle, WA 98124, or check out the excellent Internet site [www.nwrad.org](http://www.nwrad.org).