

Skype Facilitates Family Sign Classes at Mill Neck Manor



Mill Neck interpreter Donna Gualberti (front, left) leads a family Sign Language lesson for Stephanie Baynon, Karen Coll and Carol Wakefield.

At Donna Gualberti's Sign Language class each Tuesday afternoon, her student doesn't come in and take a seat, as students in Gualberti's morning classes do. Instead, Hempstead resident Karleen Murphy, whose granddaughter Heaven Leigh attends Mill Neck Manor School for the Deaf, appears on a computer screen. For several weeks now, thanks to the installation of Skype, which allows Murphy and Gualberti to connect via their computers, Murphy has the option of learning to sign remotely.

Skype enables video calling between computers via an Internet connection, use of a microphone and speakers (or headset) and webcam. Many long distance interchanges are now conducted this way, from workplace meetings to family gatherings "attended" by out-of-town relatives. The use of Skype for distance learning is also becoming a viable alternative for learning Sign Language at Mill Neck.

When a child is enrolled at Mill Neck Manor, free Sign Language classes are available to the family, with the first five lessons provided at home. The family is encouraged to continue with the lessons afterward, but need to attend subsequent classes on site. Most children attending Mill Neck don't reside in the immediate area, so for some families, the travel to the school would be a lengthy one. Working parents may not have the option of attending on site classes consistently either. Enter Skype.

"Logging on for a lesson, as an alternative to physically coming to class, was Katie's idea for a while," says Gualberti, referring to Katie Kerzner, Principal of Mill Neck's Deaf Education Center. Finding another way to offer Sign Language training facilitates the relation-

ship between school and home, an important goal in Mill Neck's commitment to the family as partners in the child's education.

Gualberti, who conducts a beginner and intermediate class weekly, has been an interpreter since 1990 and on staff at Mill Neck for 15 years. At a recent on site class, she introduced Stephanie Baynon, whose daughter, Abigail, attends Mill Neck's high school.

Gualberti points out that total communication is one of Mill Neck's goals. "In school, learning goes on for about 6 hours a day. The incidental (unplanned) learning that happens naturally at home for hearing children, after school and on weekends, can be lost for a hearing impaired child. The family's ability to more fully communicate with this child, such as by signing, greatly supplements incidental learning."

Gualberti adds, "One of hardest things deaf children face is large groups, family gatherings, with a greater amount of people and a lot of things going on. Having family members able to sign greatly facilitates the child's involvement in the family function as he or she's more able to understand what's going on."

Later, when Murphy logs on from home for her lesson with Gualberti, she emphasizes her commitment to learning Sign Language. "I want to learn, I need to learn. I think it's important to let Heaven Leigh know what's going on, especially when we're in the car and I can tell her where we're going, out to eat, or to see family. Everyday things." Murphy, whose work schedule rules out attending onsite classes, is pleased that the technology available allows her to participate in her granddaughter's education.