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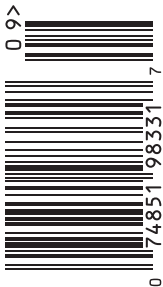
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Newark

SIGN OF THE TIMES: LEARNING TO SIGN



Jerri Parros says "hello" in her newly learned American Sign Language.

"If you can do a little sign language, that will go a long way," says instructor Thyson Halley. "A deaf person's face will light up like no tomorrow."



JERRI PARROS, a customer service agent for Alaska Airlines, recalls an interaction she had with a man last year at Newark Liberty International Airport. She approached him at a self-service kiosk to ask if he needed assistance. Instead of verbally responding, he gestured with his hands. "I felt bad," says Parros. "I knew a little [sign language], but not much."

For years, Parros had wanted to learn American Sign Language. Then, in April, shortly after the state went into lockdown to help stop the spread of Covid-19, she discovered a virtual class offered through the Newark Public Library.

"I thought, *Now's the time*," she says. Although still working, she had some newfound free time. She wanted to put it to good use.

She was not the only one. The first virtual class on April 7 drew more than 12,000 viewers from around the world on Facebook Live. There have been several thousand attendees each week since. After each free, one-hour, live class ends, a recording is posted on YouTube.

The popularity can be attributed in part to the charismatic instructor.

Thyson Halley, a program events coordinator at the Newark library, brings enthusiasm and exceptional patience to the video classes. Hard of hearing himself,

Halley was a language specialist for nearly 20 years. Most recently, he worked with children with autism at the Phoenix Center in Nutley. He also signs at Chosen Generation Ministries in Newark, where he estimates nearly 40 deaf parishioners come to worship.

"I like Thyson's energy," says Parros. "He's very energetic and positive." Often speaking and signing simultaneously, Halley has taught students how to sign everything from the alphabet and numbers to emotions and timely words—like social distancing. He believes his is New Jersey's first virtual American Sign Language class.

Parros is excited to use her new skills at work and beyond. While riding the bus to the airport, Parros, who lives in Newark, often encounters people who are deaf. She feels better equipped to interact with that population. "I know how to say, 'slow down' and 'Repeat' and 'Again,' if I don't understand something," she says.

Halley speaks of a health practitioner who sought out the class after treating a deaf patient. "She wanted to know how to sign, 'are you comfortable?'" says Halley. "That really was very touching.

"If you can do a little sign language, that will go a long way," he adds. "A deaf person's face will light up like no tomorrow."

For Parros, the class has also served as a welcome diversion from Covid-19. "I needed some positive distractions," she says.

She's proud to emerge from quarantine with a new talent.

"God willing, this will be over at some point," says Parros, "and I can say, 'During that time, I learned this.'"

—*Jacqueline Klecak*