

Personal Statement for Graduate School (PDF)

As I approached the convention hall, I wondered if I had gotten the room number wrong. I couldn't hear any signs of life, and I was losing my nerve to open the door and risk embarrassing myself. As I imagined a security guard striding up and chiding me for being somewhere I shouldn't be, a hand reached past me and pushed the door open, jolting me back to the real world. I peeked in. More hands. Hundreds of them. Hands were flying, waving, articulating, dancing. I was at once taken by awe and fear.

You can do this.

I had never planned on taking American Sign Language, and I certainly hadn't planned on it taking my heart. In my first term of college, I signed up for German, a language I had loved the sound of since I was a child. A week before classes began, however, the course section was cut. In my frustration, I decided I would take the first available language class in the course register. In hindsight, that probably wasn't the smartest approach, but it was a decision that completely altered my supposedly set-in-stone plan of becoming a linguist. The complexities of nonverbal language floored me, and I found myself thinking about hand signs while writing essays on Saussure's linguistic signs. I rearranged my schedule so I could take improv classes to help with my facial and body expressions. Theater! That was completely out of character, but I suddenly found myself compelled toward anything that would help immerse me in ASL and deaf culture.

Except actually getting involved in the community.

I knew going to my first deaf convention would be intimidating. My hands shake when I'm anxious, and nothing brings on nerves quite like throwing yourself into a situation where you are a total outsider. Between my limited vocabulary, quaking fingers and fear-frozen face, would anyone be able to understand me? What was I doing here? I had been studying American Sign Language for nearly three years and had somehow managed to avoid spontaneous conversation with the deaf community, and I was terrified. Workbook exercises and casual conversations with classmates — who had roughly the same ASL vocabulary and relied on the same linguistic crutches as I did — had become increasingly comfortable, but immersing myself in deaf culture and community was something entirely different. I was afraid. However, American Sign Language and deaf studies had captured my heart, and I knew this fear was a huge barrier I needed to get past in order to continue working toward my goal of becoming an advocate and deaf studies educator.

It must have been pretty obvious that I was both hearing and petrified, because I was immediately greeted by someone who, very formally and slowly, asked if I was a student and offered to accompany me. This small gesture is representative of how I became so fond of deaf culture in such a short period of time. The hearing community tends toward posturing, indirect communication and a sometimes isolating emphasis on individualism, and my limited experiences within the deaf community have been the opposite. The straightforward communication that exists in a beautifully nuanced and perspicacious language and the welcoming enthusiasm to grow the community is something I intend to be part of. I am an outsider, and I have much to learn, but I want to do everything I can to encourage understanding and exchange between the deaf and

hearing communities and make hearing spaces more inclusive, especially for those who have more experience as outsiders than I do.

My devotion to language and learning about culture through communication hasn't changed, but the path by which I want to pursue that passion has. My foray into deaf studies and American Sign Language may have started as an accident, but no matter how nervous I still get when my fingers fumble or I have to spell something out, I am humbled and grateful that this accident led me to a calling that could have remained unheard my whole life.