



UTAHHOME

# Utah center for deaf and blind takes part in new signing training

By Spencer Burt | Nov 24, 2018, 8:00pm MDT

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Jelica Nuccio, center, trains interpreters in an organic form of American Sign Language called Protactile ASL in Salt Lake City on Friday, Nov. 9, 2018. | Jeffrey D. Allred, Deseret News | [Purchase Photo](#)



TAYLORSVILLE — People who are deaf-blind have to communicate and experience the world around them using mostly just one sense: touch.

Recently, a group of deaf-blind Utahns learned an emerging method of sign language that could change their lives.

Jelica Nuccio and John Lee Clark, both nationally recognized trainers, came to the Sanderson Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nov. 8-10 to teach deaf-blind individuals and interpreters Protactile American Sign Language.



While tactile sign language helps the deaf-blind to understand by feeling someone's hands while they sign, protactile signing provides a way for the deaf-blind to better communicate and understand conversations, and more fully experience the world around them. It utilizes the whole body, such as the legs, arms, chest, back and head.

For example, lightly tapping on a deaf-blind person's arm or knee signifies that the listener is nodding in agreement. Quickly rubbing back and forth on the same areas would signify "no," a disagreement or another negative reaction. Drawing a question mark on the deaf-blind person's chest means the listener is confused or doesn't understand.

Protactile ASL is new to Utah's deaf-blind community, Stephen Ehrlich said. It was developed "organically" by people in the deaf and blind community starting in 2007, and he thinks Utah was just out of the loop for a while.

Ehrlich, who was born deaf and visually impaired before eventually losing sight completely, participated in the training. He said although having three full days of training was great, he wishes they had more.

"It was very rich experience for everyone involved," he said in sign language via interpreter Clay Anderson.

Ehrlich teaches sign language at the Sanderson Center, particularly to adults who are developing deaf-blindness. He is also part of a committee that will discuss what the next step will be in continuing protactile education.

"We will keep practicing it," he said. "This is just the beginning of a new journey for us."

Dan Mathis, assistant director of the Sanderson Center, said the purpose of the protactile training was to make communication more inclusive and accessible. He said that among the deaf and hearing communities, people who are deaf-blind are sometimes left out and overlooked.

"We don't recognize that community enough," Mathis said. "Protactile signing is a way to bridge those communities better. So it's a learning experience for myself as well."

More specifically, both Mathis and Ehrlich said the goal is to help local deaf-blind individuals become future trainers and teachers of protactile signing. This would provide good job opportunities for deaf-blind people, who have a hard time finding work, Ehrlich said.

Ehrlich also works at Sears, where he repairs broken ratchets. It's difficult, he said, because he feels isolated with such a limited way of communication.

He doesn't like that feeling, so he likes to rake leaves and shovel snow and do other things outside that keep him busy.

Mathis said many deaf-blind people feel isolated from their surroundings, but protactile ASL gives them a way to feel more connected. An interpreter can use a deaf-blind person's back as a map to describe the room, helping them visualize who is there and what they're doing.

Tony Bonny, an ASL interpreter for staff members at Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind, was excited about what he learned at the trainings.

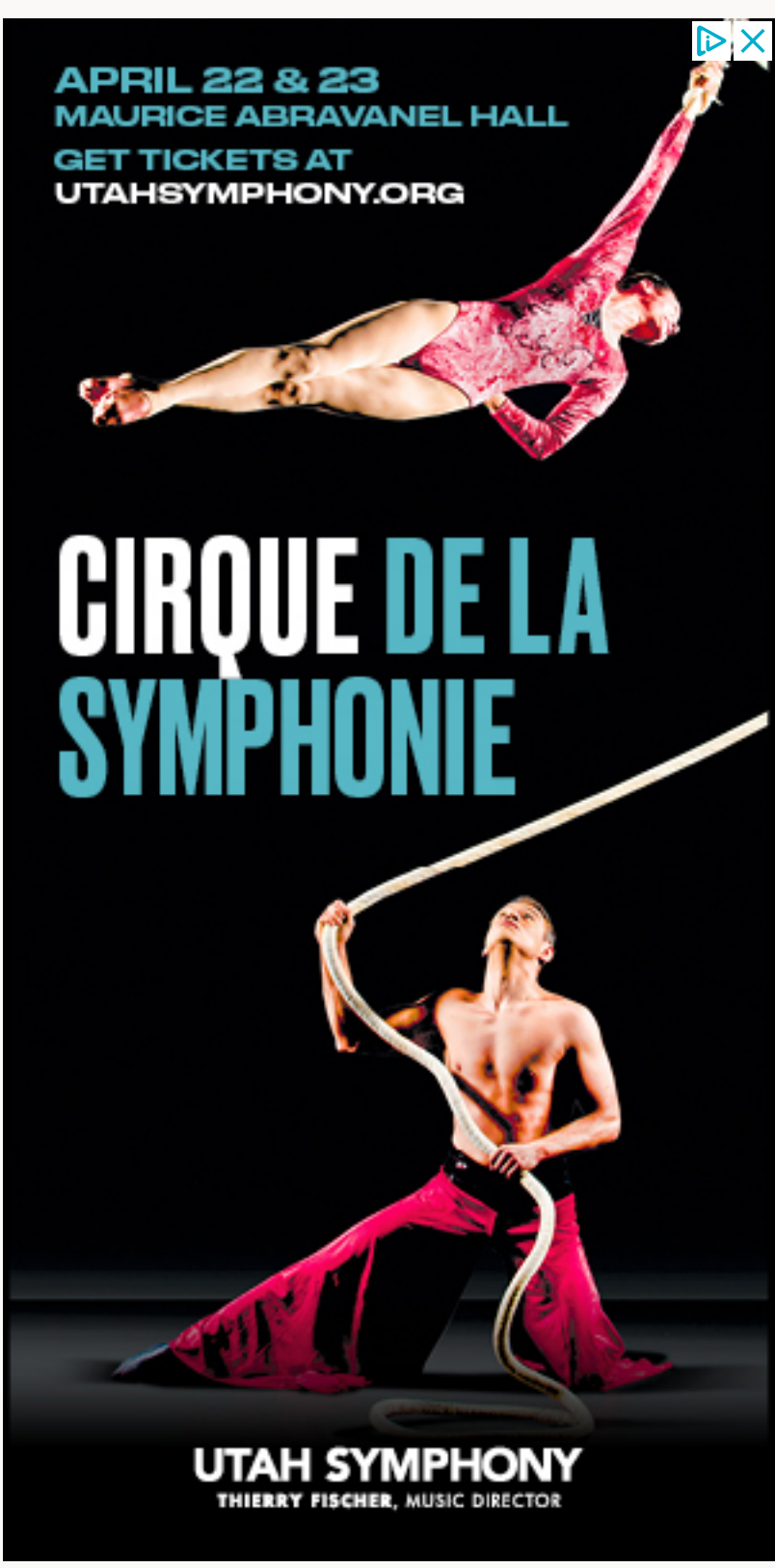
Like Ehrlich, Bonny wishes he had more time to learn protactile signing.

"I really enjoyed myself. I'm actually exploring other options to get more training, because I felt like I just really wanted to jump and immerse myself in this language," he said.

Traditional ASL a visual language, creating a "picture in the air," Bonny said. He was glad to learn a way to do the same in a purely tactile way, "creating messages that you could not necessarily see and conceptualize, but feel and conceptualize."

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