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UVU professor plans first deaf culture digital library

By Natalie Crofts

October 29th, 2013 @ 10:53am

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OREM — The development of an online deaf studies library would not just benefit students, but could help answer the question of what makes us human, according to a professor at Utah Valley University.

The Deaf World Library and Museum would be the first digital resource to offer access to relevant historical materials through a single online portal. Bryan Eldredge, director of the American Sign Language and Deaf Studies at UVU received funding from a grant from Washington, D.C.'s Institute of Museum and Library Services for \$50,000 in October to help plan the library.

"The benefits of that research are just incredible really, because it advances our understanding not only of deaf people, but of what it means to be human because when we look at this kind of unique group of humans it forces us to challenge our basic assumptions of who we are," he said.



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The idea for the online library came about when Eldredge was trying to gather resources for his students at UVU when they were granted a bachelors degree program. It became obvious that just putting energy into building up UVU's collection was the wrong way to go about things, and they needed to find a way to share materials between institutions because often there was only one physical copy available, he said.

They are currently trying to identify

what resources are needed and who should be involved with meetings scheduled to start in December.

Gathering resources into one location would give students and the deaf community access to materials they wouldn't otherwise be able to access without travel. Eldredge said he hopes someday e-books and interactive photographs of physical objects, like the first telephone made for the deaf, could be used in deaf schools to teach students about their culture.

"They'll be able to find essentially genealogy, maybe not of their exact families, but of the people who have led their educational experiences, which is really where they really get introduced to the deaf world and have access to language and education," he said.

Deaf studies is still a relatively new science, Eldridge said. Philosophers have long been interested in deaf people, with even Plato referencing how they conversed with their hands, but modern deaf studies didn't really begin until the 1960's when a professor realized ASL was its own unique language and not just English on the hands.

"Now we've kind of gotten beyond that to a point where now we're asking 'what does that mean to us that there are deaf people?'" Eldredge said. "Because of the fact that we have deaf people and they have their own language and their own culture, it tells us a lot of things."

Eldredge's interest in ASL and deaf culture was sparked when he went on an LDS mission to Oakland, Calif. There was a 6 foot 10 inch tall deaf elder who had played basketball for Rick's college in his first district, and he started asking the elder's hearing companion how to say things like "that was a foul you big oaf." "let's go to 7-11 to get a Big Gulp" and "have a nice day tomorrow." Eventually Eldredge was put into the deaf program and spent 16 months with deaf companions.

What really intrigued Eldredge was a conversation he had during his mission with a deaf teenager who said deaf people were really lucky because signing all of the time made them stronger than people who used their mouths to speak.

"In retrospect I don't know why I didn't just look at that and think it was silly and naïve, but I didn't," Eldredge said. "I thought to myself, 'I wonder why he thinks this way. Pretty soon I realized deaf people see the world in very different ways from hearing people do, and that just fascinated me. That of course made me realize the way I saw the world; I just assumed the way I saw the world was the way the world is. Suddenly I just realized there were other equally plausible alternatives, and it just kind of swallowed me up from there."

His interest led him to a career in linguistic anthropology and studying the deaf community in Utah for his graduate studies. Now he is married to a deaf woman.

Eldredge is optimistic planning for the library will eventually lead to a larger grant to make the library become a reality. If it does, he said access to deaf studies materials could cut travel costs and open the doors for more creativity.

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"I've got a colleague, for example, who wrote a history of American culture and its effect on deaf education and in order to do that he had to go spend months and months at different places going through boxes and boxes of papers," Eldredge said. "Well, if this thing gets pulled off he'll be able to sit in his office and access these documents and find the ones he's actually looking for right away, because we're going to get all of those documents digitalized."

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