

YESTERDAY
& TODAY

Say

(Hello)

to Julio

Long ago, deaf children were trapped in a lonely world. Not anymore. Just ask 13-year-old Julio Navarro. He'll tell you—in sign language. **By Rebecca Leon**

TODAY

Julio Navarro

Sign language connects this teen to his buddies—and to the world

Julio Navarro rushes off the school bus and heads straight to the cafeteria. His friends are all waiting for him, and they immediately start telling stories and cracking jokes. And yet there is hardly any noise.

That's because Julio and his friends at St. Joseph's School for the Deaf in the Bronx, New York, are communicating in American Sign Language (ASL).

ASL is not simply a way of spelling out words using hand gestures. It is a unique and complex language with its own vocabulary and grammar. It involves the whole body and face; watching Julio and his friends sign is like watching a dance. Their hands twist and turn and flutter and fly. They move their bodies and study each other's faces as they silently mouth certain words.

Julio, 13, has been deaf since birth. He started learning to sign at school when he was 3. His mother, who can hear, learned along with him. Julio wears a hearing aid, which helps him pick up some sounds. He also reads lips and takes classes to build his speech skills.

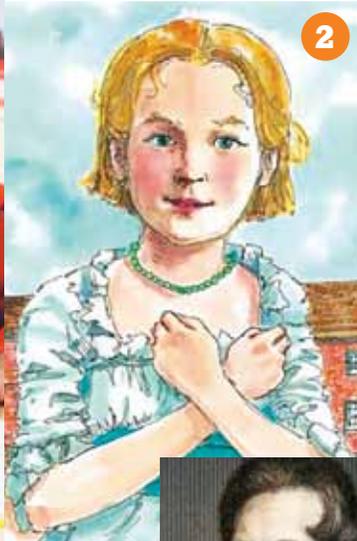
But ASL is what best enables Julio to connect with friends and keep up with the challenging classes he takes at school. All of his teachers use sign language. Like many deaf people who know ASL, Julio far prefers it to other forms of communication.

But some fear ASL will slowly die out as more students are placed in regular schools and classrooms with hearing students. Educators have long debated whether it's best to teach deaf students with sign language or by methods that emphasize speech. Many schools for the deaf are closing.

Ask Julio if it's challenging to be a person who speaks ASL. "No," he signs confidently. "There's nothing hard about it." ■



1. Julio (left) and his friend Najay Haughton work together at St. Joseph's; **2.** Alice Cogswell makes the sign for love; **3.** Thomas Gallaudet, pioneer in deaf education; **4.** A boy signs "I love you."



YESTERDAY

Alice Cogswell

In the early 1800s, few thought deaf kids could learn. This little girl helped change their minds.

Nine-year-old Alice Cogswell, with well-groomed curls and a tidy ruffled dress, sat in her neighbor's yard in Hartford, Connecticut. She watched the children of her block play. From their smiles she could tell that they were laughing. But she couldn't hear their shouts or giggles. Alice had been deaf from the age of 2, living in a silent world since a serious illness robbed her of hearing.

The year was 1814, and few opportunities existed for children like Alice. Unable to hear or talk, she didn't attend school like her older sisters. There were no teachers to teach deaf children. In those days, most people believed that deaf children couldn't learn at all.

But Alice was about to help change her own life—and the lives of deaf children across America. That day, her neighbor's son, a young minister named Thomas Gallaudet, noticed that

Alice wasn't playing with the other kids. When he tried speaking to her, he realized that she couldn't hear. Still, he couldn't miss her bright, curious eyes. He started to draw pictures in the dirt and saw that she was eager to learn. Placing his hat on the ground, he scratched out the letters H-A-T. Alice made the connection! Soon Gallaudet had taught her to read and write dozens of words.

A New School

Alice's father adored his young daughter. He had read about schools for the deaf in Europe. Why shouldn't Alice and other deaf children in the United States have such a school? he thought. Heartened by Alice's progress, he urged Gallaudet to go to Europe to learn their methods.

After 15 months there, Gallaudet returned to Connecticut, bringing with him Laurent Clerc, a teacher from a famous school for the deaf in Paris, France.

Gallaudet and Clerc opened the country's first deaf school in 1817, and Alice was the first pupil to enroll. Together, the teachers and students—33 in its initial year—created American Sign Language, based partly on French sign language and partly on signs the students had invented. Deaf students could now learn subjects like reading, history, and math, as well as skills like shoemaking and cabinetmaking for the boys and sewing and housekeeping for the girls.

Years later, Alice recalled what it was like to finally be able to communicate. "It felt like I had been freed from a silent tomb," she said. ■

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

After reading both articles, think about three ways in which Julio's and Alice's experiences are alike and three ways in which they are different. Write your answers in a well-organized paragraph.

GET THIS ACTIVITY ONLINE