

Virginia Association of the Deaf, Inc.



April 10, 2016

Meredith Sugar, President
Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (AGBell)
3417 Volta Place, NW
Washington, D.C., 20007

Dear Ms. Sugar,

This is an open letter to the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Your article “Dispelling Myths About Deafness” in which you deny years of research and disparage the living, vibrant language which is American Sign Language (ASL), was, indeed, typical of your Association. This is yet another example of AGBell’s outright refusal to recognize that native users of ASL can be and are successful, and lead productive, rich and thriving lives with or without “listening and spoken language”. Nyle DiMarco is just the most recent of many examples, and you know it.

A few more glaring errors need to be corrected: American Sign Language is far from declining, but is in fact the 4th – and some researchers even say it’s the 3rd - most studied language on U.S. college campuses today. Yet you dismiss ASL, calling it a “communication option” as if it’s merely a crutch or an accommodation. ASL is a language and recognized as such in legislation. The 2011 passage of HB 1435 in Virginia, for example, mandates that public high schools, in Virginia must accept American Sign Language toward fulfillment of foreign language requirements for graduation. It is a natural language developed over time by its users, governed by rules, and shared by a diverse community. The linguistic history of ASL is as fascinating as is the language’s accompanying deaf culture. Your tone in your recent letter rebuffs any recent legislation and current scientific research confirming the popularity and benefits of ASL for both deaf and hearing people and instead strives to unilaterally dismiss ASL and Deaf culture and misdirect your audiences with your “hearing culture”.

Alas, deafness and ASL is indeed surrounded by myths and misconceptions perpetuated by you and other professionals involved with working with deaf people: well-meaning doctors, speech-language pathologists, and teachers. One of your most dangerous myths is that promoting the use of ASL comes at the expense of spoken language. You could not be more wrong. We want our deaf children to gain all the advantages of a language-rich environment, one in which they can develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally equally with their peers.

Your article has demonstrated that AGBell continues to reject the findings from current research on ASL, deaf culture, and natural language acquisition for deaf children. Asserting that AGBell has any idea of “what it means to be ‘deaf’” reeks of willful ignorance, paternalism and complete disregard for current research and salient understanding of language, culture and language acquisition and complete dismissal of true welfare and well-being of the whole deaf child. We can only conclude that AGBell does not serve or support the deaf and hard of hearing and is perpetuating a lie.

Yours Sincerely,

Jeanne Lavelle, President,
Star Grieser, Vice-President
Rachel Bavister, Secretary,
Tom Dowling, Treasurer

Emily Bowers, Director – Blue Ridge Chapter

Wayne Frick, Director – Skyline Chapter

Melanie Williams, Director – Northern Virginia Association of the Deaf Chapter

Byron Heath, Director – Greater Richmond Chapter

The mission of the **Virginia Association of the Deaf** is
*to promote, protect, and preserve
the rights and quality of life of
Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals
in the Commonwealth of Virginia.*