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A chance to chat

Deaf DeKalb residents share stories, summer plans at DeKalb Borders

By Tom Bukowski for The MidWeek

Sharing with each other laughs, stories and their summer plans, about a dozen deaf or hard of hearing DeKalb County residents gathered at the DeKalb Borders at 2520 Sycamore Road on June 16 to socialize and meet new people.

The gathering took place, thanks in part to the nationwide Deaf Chat Coffee movement that originated in California to provide deaf and hard of hearing people a common place to gather.

This was the DeKalb Borders' first Deaf Chat Coffee gathering, which will meet from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. the third Friday of every month, and many more people are expected to attend future gatherings, said Terri Welch, an American Sign Language class teacher who started DeKalb's official Deaf Chat Coffee gathering with her husband, Luke Welch. The couple also created Rockford's Deaf Chat Coffee gathering at Bad Ass Coffee, which will meet from 4 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. the first Friday of every month.

She first found out about the Deaf Chat Coffee movement from a friend of hers who attended a Deaf Chat Coffee gathering in Florida, Welch said through her husband, who is hearing.

Rebecca Salamie, a Northern Illinois University senior public health major, relished the opportunity to meet other deaf or hard of hearing people in the DeKalb area at the June 16 gathering. She lost her ability to hear when she contracted meningitis at age 3, Salamie said, using sign language and her limited ability to use her voice.

She doesn't find it too difficult to be deaf and attend the mostly hearing NIU because she's taken classes at schools for deaf and hard of hearing students, Salamie said, though a special challenge she's recently encountered is having a boyfriend who is hearing and choosing to teach him American Sign Language.

Deaf Chat Coffee gatherings throughout the country are organized by the www.deafcoffee.com Web site. Currently, 40 states in the U.S. host Deaf Chat Coffee gatherings, with a total of 180 gatherings being reported to the Web site according to the site's May 7 newsletter. Canada also hosts Deaf Chat Coffee gatherings.

Users of the Web site can search for Deaf Chat Coffee gatherings in their area by selecting their state from the Web site's main menu. The gatherings usually take place at local coffee shops, with the nationwide coffee brand Starbucks being an unofficial meeting place for many gatherings.

The DeKalb Borders, which has an in-store café and comfortable seating for groups of people, was a perfect meeting place for this group of deaf and hard of hearing individuals at the June 16 gathering.

DeKalb resident Jeffery Campbell, who volunteers for the DeKalb Tails Humane Society, found out about the event thanks to Terri and Luke Welch. Campbell, who has been hard of hearing all his life and is currently deaf in one ear, said he also attends gatherings for deaf and hard of hearing people in Rockford and sometimes Chicago.

American Sign Language students are also encouraged to attend Deaf Chat Coffee gatherings to practice their signing and to learn how to effectively communicate with deaf and hard of hearing people, according to the Deaf Coffee Web site.

The deaf and hard of hearing community, which is referred to as the "Deaf community," is a culture that values collectivism, pride and sharing a common language, according to an article by the National Association of the Deaf. Clubs and organizations created for and by Deaf people can create strong family-like connections for their members.

The familial feeling of this community came through at the June 16 gathering. For many Deaf people such as Salamie, whose parents aren't deaf, gatherings such as these provide the opportunity to make new friends and share information that the mostly hearing society can't provide them with as effectively.

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