



## Deaf teen leaves rural community for fresh start in Regina school



For those in remote and rural Sask., a hearing impairment can present major challenges

Tiffany Cassidy · CBC News · Posted: Mar 22, 2016 4:47 PM CT | Last Updated: March 22, 2016

Deaf and partly deaf students learn in a Regina classroom 1:17

---

Seventeen-year-old Shayla Tanner, who is deaf, has faced challenges academically and socially in her home community but has seen tremendous growth in the past three years.

She recalls that with few in her community of Cowessess First Nation knowing sign language, she fell behind in school and socializing.

### 'I just felt horrible'

"With my work I really felt like I just wanted to give up with it," she said through her interpreter as she signed. "I couldn't communicate with my friends and I felt like I was just having a breakdown.

"With reading, when I used my voice while at my old school there were four kids and they said they couldn't understand me, and I just felt horrible about that."

Tanner says she would try to read lips and write notes to speak to others in her community.

"They would talk slow to me, but I still didn't understand. They would talk and I just didn't really get it."

Making friends was more difficult than it is now.

### New beginning at Regina high school

It was her special education teacher who suggested she go to school at Thom Collegiate in Regina.

Thom teacher Joanne Weber, who is deaf herself, runs a class that has been highly praised for the way it [focuses on visual learning and sign language](#).

- [Art could be the next big breakthrough in deaf education](#)

And so, three years ago, Tanner left Cowessess and moved in with her brother in Regina so that she could join the program.

It's was a challenge, she says. She learned a more in-depth version of American Sign Language and gained a better grasp of English grammar.



Shayla Tanner watches as her teacher, Joanne Weber, teaches a class lesson by using sign language. (Tiffany Cassidy/CBC)

## Overcoming language deprivation a challenge

Weber notes that many deaf and hard of hearing teens have reduced vocabularies due to language deprivation.

This occurs when language is not made accessible either through hearing or signing. These teens may struggle with naming the objects they use every day and will resort to pointing to the object or describing its colour and shape.

According to Weber, it's her job to force students to use the sign or word for the object.

Tanner's parents say they wished there was more programming for the deaf and hard of hearing in rural Saskatchewan.

They consider themselves fortunate to live only 160 kilometres away from the capital city, with a son already living there.

"Society's so stuck on accommodating themselves because they have no issues to deal with," Dean Tanner said.

"They're good to go. Whereas if they stopped and took away the hearing of an individual that hears and hears everything every day, and took it away and told them to go out and make a living, they would fall over, right now. That's just the way I see it."





Shayla Tanner shows her parents, Shelly and Dean Tanner, the artwork she's been working on in class. (Tiffany Cassidy/CBC)

---

## Deaf and hard of hearing education 'nonexistent' in rural areas, says director

Better access to sign language in Saskatchewan's more remote communities is something Nairn Gilles has been working on for a long time.

As the executive director of Saskatchewan Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, he spends time in northern Saskatchewan teaching sign language to deaf students, their teachers, and their peers.

He says the hard of hearing in these communities are isolated and vulnerable. His goal in teaching sign language is to improve their learning, and also give them someone to talk to.

"Our children that we come in contact with, some of them have no language at all," Gilles said.

"When you have no sound in your world and they're trying to force that, that's the only way we're going to communicate with you is through sound, it doesn't work. We've seen lots of kids that have started quitting school at nine, 10, 11 years old ... We have a lot of work to do in Saskatchewan, that's a fact."

### Sign language boost socialization

Gilles says when he teaches hearing students sign language, it can have a big impact on the social life of hard and hearing children, as those who hear want to practise with the one who can't.

A lack of access to sign language is something he says extends beyond the remote north.

"It almost seems ridiculous, but a child in Weyburn or Wynyard ... could be as isolated because there's no one in that area who has the skills."

Gilles added he doesn't think highly of the state of deaf and hard of hearing education in rural and remote communities.

"It's terrible to say, but it's nonexistent," he said.

The government does fund programs for the development of the deaf and hard of hearing. Gilles' pointed criticism is mostly aimed at the lack of American Sign Language in the classroom.

The province lacks trained people in the classroom who are fluent in ASL with the ability to teach the deaf and hard of hearing in a way that doesn't focus on oral communication, Gilles said.

He imagines a world where Shakespeare could be brought to life by signing the same way some teachers bring it to life through a lively reading.

## **Tanner turning 18**

Gilles says Tanner is "the top end of the story."

Tanner's turning 18 in April and when she graduates school she would be like to work in fashion as she's interested in art.

"I really feel proud of myself," she said. "I've really improved a lot since I've come here."

©2018 CBC/Radio-Canada. All rights reserved.

Visitez Radio-Canada.ca