

Sign here, please: Regina-area customers try their hands at deaf dining experience

Regina's Deaf Crows group offer people the chance to learn and communicate through sign

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Deaf and hard-of-hearing students work with diners to manage menu options.

Deaf waiters welcome people at the door with smiles, silently encouraging them to have a seat at Pilot Butte's Blue Rooster Cafe on a Saturday night.

People look at their menus and tentatively make signs for their food, asking for more water or coffee, laughing at themselves as they stumble trying to find the gestures to communicate.

This is a deaf dining experience, put on by the students from Thom Collegiate's Deaf & Hard of Hearing program and the Deaf Crows Collective.

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"I feel again like the first time I learned English, there's so many things you want to say," said hearing customer Serge Dubé. Dubé learned English at the age of 30, and still remembered the struggle it was to put words together to make a sentence.

"Here you cannot put the gestures together to make a sentence."

At a Deaf Dining Experience, hearing people had to communicate with sign language with waiters who identify as deaf or hard of hearing. Here, 19-year-old Shayla Tanner takes an order from a table. (CBC News)

Thom Collegiate team teacher Michelle Grodecki said she got the idea for a deaf dining experience when she heard of a deaf restaurant operating in Toronto.

"That was kind of my dream when I saw that. I thought, 'Ooh, we need to have this in Saskatchewan,'" she said.



Everything intersects, which is so beautiful about our program.

- Michelle Grodecki, team teacher

The evening was meant to raise funds for a Deaf Crows Collective theatre production, called Apple Time, that will be staged this June.

Grodecki noted the night brought together many elements, showing the students entrepreneurship, job and business skills, as well as English lessons involved in putting together a menu teaching people how to sign.

"Everything intersects, which is so beautiful about our program."

Teacher Joanne Weber talks to the audience about the Deaf Crows Collective and their work. (CBC News)

But organizers hoped that hearing people would also take something away from the night.

"We're trying to make it fun, make it accessible, just to give them that experience, that deaf people are very competent; they can do what they need to do," fellow teacher Joanne Weber explained. "You don't need to be scared or worried about it."

Students Shayla Tanner and Mustafa Alabssi were among the waiters patiently helping customers as they worked through the signs.

"We want them to know it really doesn't matter, we see each other as equal," explained Tanner, through an interpreter.

Alabssi agreed, noting it was interesting to watch people communicate through American Sign Language.

"They're realizing it's not so easy. That's OK, we're going to work together, I'm going to teach you, and you're going to learn, and I'll keep explaining.

"And that's something that sometimes people forget to do for us."

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