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Deaf studies becomes a fascinating subject and a future field for Heather Bennett

Fascination with sign language leads to accelerated study program at LaGuardia CC

By [Olivia Cho](#) / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS



Jeanne Noonan for New York Daily News

Heather Bennett is studying American Sign Language in an accelerated program at LaGuardia Community College.

At 29, [Heather Bennett](#) is a bit older than most of her freshmen classmates at LaGuardia Community College. “I know I’m not old, but I feel old,” says the Middle Village native, with a laugh.

After graduating from Forest Hills High School in 2000, Bennett bounced between schools, first as an illustration major at the School of Visual Arts, then as a computer programming major at Katherine Gibbs School.

After realizing she was unhappy with both, she decided to take a hiatus from college. She worked in consumer affairs at the Neilsen company and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s distribution center.

Then her career path was shaped by a surprising figure: her boyfriend’s sister, [Monika Koziol](#).

Koziol is borderline deaf and has a minor hearing loss that makes it difficult for her to communicate with many people, including friends and family.

After Koziol began teaching Bennett some basic symbols of American Sign Language, she realized that Deaf Studies should be her concentration, and she enrolled in an ASL I class at Hofstra University.

“Even though it wouldn’t count for credit, I loved it,” she says. “It’s a different way of expressing yourself.” After her class at Hofstra ended, Bennett was selected to be part of LaGuardia Community College’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), a CUNY program funded by the mayor’s office. ASAP offers students from low-income families free tuition, textbooks and monthly MetroCards.

“I didn’t know what it was until I got my letter in the mail,” she says.

The financial assistance has been a great help. Bennett, a former dancer, needed several surgical procedures for injuries even after she had hung up her ballet slippers.

“I loved dancing, but it was too hard to hold down a job with a cast on one foot,” she says.

As part of the Deaf Studies program, Bennett is on a two-year track that includes classes in English, math, psychology and ASL.

Though she has to wait until January to begin ASL courses, Bennett says the environment at LaGuardia is very conducive to learning. She likes the diversity among faculty and students there.

Even though she has slowly adjusted, Bennett still notices the age difference in her classes.

“It feels like I’m in high school again, but I just focus hard on what I need to do,” she says.

After she wraps up her two years at LaGuardia, Bennett says she hopes to find work as an interpreter.

She’s received much encouragement for her ambitions, especially from her boyfriend and his family.

“It’s great to have this much support,” she says with a grin. “I’ve even begun to teach my little nieces some signs.”

Read more: <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/deaf-studies-a-fascinating-subject-a-future-field-heather-bennett-article-1.1007541#ixzz1jov0GgII>

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