

September 2022

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MJ Bienvenu
Gallaudet University

Kathy Jankowski
Gallaudet University

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Recommended Citation

Bienvenu, MJ and Jankowski, Kathy (2022) "A Tribute to Barbara Marie Kannapell," *Society for American Sign Language Journal*: Vol. 6: No. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/saslj/vol6/iss2/6>

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A TRIBUTE TO BARBARA MARIE KANNAPELL

MJ BIENVENU
Gallaudet University

KATHY JANKOWSKI
Gallaudet University

It is an honor and pleasure to present this tribute to Dr. Barbara Marie Kannapell, widely known as Kanny in this special issue of SASLJ. She, along with Nathie Lee Marbury and Marie Jean Philip, are well deserving of this recognition for their trailblazing efforts to promote American Sign Language (ASL), Deaf culture and bilingualism (i.e., ASL and written English for the education of Deaf children). Kanny's scholarship and advocacy coincide with how "[t]he time has come for ASL to take its rightful place in American education and society just as the time has come for Deaf people to enjoy their full rights as human beings and citizens" (National Association of the Deaf, 1993, p. 8). Her impact has been profound and deep and this paper will follow Kanny's endeavors in the Deaf community over the years. Her path is best described as evolutionary with Kanny learning and adapting through time as a pioneer. Special attention is given to Kanny's academic accomplishments and perspectives.



Figure 1: Dr. Barbara Marie Kannapell
(1937 - 2021)
Photo courtesy of Eileen Paul

ROOTS OF AN EVOLUTION

Kanny's path to becoming a strong advocate for the language and culture of Deaf people began with her roots. Having had Deaf parents, ASL was an integral part of Kanny's upbringing. A different world, however, emerged when she attended an oral school for deaf children in Kentucky. The language of signs she used so comfortably and fluently at home and in the Deaf community was banned in the classroom. Instead, Deaf students were expected to speak and lipread. With articulation and lipreading being unnatural exercises for many Deaf people, Kanny and many of her peers struggled in this environment. As Kanny recalled years later, she was labeled an "oral failure." She later attended the Kentucky School for the Deaf until her junior year of high school when she transferred to the Indiana School for the Deaf, graduating in 1956. Kanny then went on to attend Gallaudet University. Her experiences in these early years shaped her future activism in the Deaf community.

That path, however, took some twists and turns before it became clear to Kanny that ASL was indeed, a separate language from English. In the late 1960s, she participated in a project housed in the department of Psychology at Gallaudet. The result of this project was a publication of "Signs for Instructional Purposes," which illustrated signs that Gallaudet instructors could use with their students. This guide was published in 1969 with Kanny as co-author, along with Lillian B. Hamilton and Harry Bornstein. Noted Deaf artist and Kanny's close friend, Betty G. Miller was the illustrator for this book. MJ Bienvenu recalled Kanny relating that although the book had good intentions, she had struggled internally with the book. This was before ASL was recognized as a language and Kanny instinctively knew there was something wrong...the signs in the book were invented and not reflective of the ASL used by the Deaf community.

Though Kanny knew the invented signs did not fit in with the ASL she used with Deaf people, the realization that ASL was a different language from English came when she met and fell in love with Eileen Paul. When they met, Eileen did not know any signs and wanted desperately to learn. Kanny referred her to a class where signs were taught and, in that class, Eileen met Ann Wilson, a hearing mother of a Deaf child. After several sessions, Eileen challenged the instructor, saying that what was being taught in the classroom was not the same as the signs she saw Deaf people using. Ann herself agreed, as she was observing the same thing with her Deaf son and his friends. This led to intense discussions with all three becoming increasingly convinced that ASL was a language of its own.

DEAFPRIDE: AN ADVOCACY MODEL

Kanny, Eileen, and Ann's discussions sparked their interest in establishing a nonprofit organization to advocate for the human rights of Deaf people in the Washington, DC area. They established Deafpride in 1972 with a mission to empower Deaf people and their families to advocate for their rights. Workshops and training were offered toward that end. Simultaneously, training was provided to hospitals, the police academy, and other agencies to enlighten the community about the rights of Deaf people. Deafpride also offered interpreting services and ASL classes. Ahead of many organizations at the time, Deafpride actively brought together Black, white and diverse families and their Deaf children. Kanny (2014) noted that Deafpride was "the first community-based non-profit organization to recognize ASL as the language of Deaf people and to support the bilingual approach to teaching Deaf children" (p. 12) With the launch of Deafpride, Kanny emerged as a leader in promoting ASL and Deaf culture, as well as embracing diversity in the Deaf community.

Defining Bilingualism

During the early 1970s when the concept of bilingualism was gaining momentum in the education of Spanish-speaking children, it was thought that this could not apply to Deaf children for various reasons. During that time, "manual communication" was often the term used for ASL. Kanny, in a ground-breaking move, argued that bilingual education could and should be applied to Deaf students. It was often thought that ASL or "manual communication" was a "distorted" form of English. Kanny explained that if one took the findings of William C. Stokoe and his team of researchers, it was clear that ASL was "a language in its own right" (Kannapell, 1973, p. 31). Instead of using artificial sign systems "to create English visually," ASL should be recognized as "a **visual** language, rather than a **verbal** language—with its own grammar and syntax" (Kannapell, 1973, p. 31). Responding to misconceptions about ASL at the time, Kanny emphasized, "It is **not** a distortion of English, any more than French or Spanish are

distortions of English” (Kannapell, 1973, p. 31). As such, Kanny wrote, “Bilingual education for deaf children would mean that ASL and English would have an equal place in the education of deaf children” (Kannapell, 1973, p. 31). At the time, ASL was still just beginning to be recognized as its own language and this concept of bilingual education as applied to Deaf children was a novel idea.

A year later in 1974, Kanny wrote a more in-depth analysis of bilingual education for hearing children who spoke languages other than English, drawing parallels to Deaf children. She noted how the dominant perception that “English is the standard language in the USA and all citizens must learn it” (Kannapell, 1974, p. 12) was an overriding factor. This premise had the effect of devaluing languages other than English. On the contrary, Kanny argued, the use of ASL with Deaf children would be a positive influence:

Schools for the deaf could do much for Deaf children in building a positive self-image. Acceptance of language and culture will result in the preservation and creation of Deaf poetry, Deaf theater, Deaf art forms.... Fostering the language and visual skills will foster new and unique forms of art and creativity for Deaf persons (Kannapell, 1974, p. 14).

In this article, Kanny noted that the Spanish language was not the same in Mexico, Spain, Puerto Rico, or Cuba and raised the question about whether there was a “Black ASL” or a “Chicano ASL” urging these possibilities be researched (Kannapell, 1974). Raising these ideas during an era when ASL was still struggling to be recognized as a formal language illustrates how Kanny was ahead of her time.

Promoting ASL as a Language

“[M]y language is me?...to reject ASL is to reject the deaf person.”

- Kannapell, 1980, p. 111-112

Kanny traveled extensively throughout the United States and abroad to promote the human right of Deaf people to their language and culture and advocated for bilingual education in schools for Deaf students. It was during one of her travels that she met MJ. It was 1978 when Kanny and MJ were on the same flight while on their way to San Diego for the 2nd National Symposium on Sign Language Research and Teaching. The flight from Washington, DC to San Diego was long enough; however, it became even longer when inclement weather forced their flight to divert to the Los Angeles airport instead. They then had to take a long bus ride to San Diego. Though this much prolonged route would have been an exhausting experience under ordinary circumstances, it was made less so because Kanny



Figure 2: Kanny in one of her presentations.
Courtesy of Eileen Paul.

and MJ enjoyed chatting the entire way. They touched on so many topics and learned they had much in common. This was the beginning of a long-term friendship and also illustrates the person Kanny was. Despite her rising fame, she was a down-to-earth person and was very much approachable.



Figure 3: MJ and Kanny, circa 2018.
Courtesy of MJ Bienvenu.

While Kanny provided research-based information to support her contention that bilingualism was in the best interest of Deaf students, she added research of her own. In 1985, she completed her doctoral studies in sociolinguistics from Georgetown University and presented new insights on the relationship between language choice and identity choice by analyzing results from college students. She concluded that a “harmonious identification with both Deaf and hearing cultures,” could be promoted or disrupted, depending on how Deaf students are taught in schools. Ideally, educators would seek to strengthen the Deaf identity and foster a mastery of ASL to achieve this goal (Kannapell, 1994, p. 47). Her dissertation was subsequently published as a book, *Language Choice – Identity Choice* in 1993, and Kanny used this research to support her promotion of bilingualism in Deaf education.

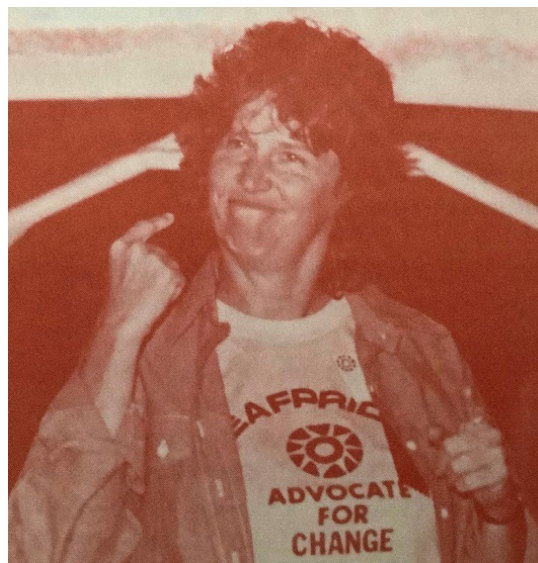


Figure 4: Kanny celebrating the achievement of her doctoral degree on a Deafpride cruise in 1985.
Courtesy of the *Deafpride Advocate*, fall 1985, p. 1.

One by one, seed by seed, Kanny cultivated and promoted ASL as a language and bilingualism for Deaf children locally and globally, through presentations, interviews, videos, articles, letters. She left no stone unturned. The journey was a difficult one, with many barriers along the way. She encountered skepticism, challenges, and even rejection as she sought to enlighten as many as possible. She persevered as more and more advocates joined the march.

Slowly, but surely, progress began to happen. The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) in 1984 “formally recognized ASL and English as the natural languages of the Deaf community and advocated a bilingual approach in the education of deaf” (Kannapell, 2014, p. 13). Schools for the Deaf began using ASL in classrooms and enacting bilingual policies. ASL classes were offered in public schools and higher education settings.

Yet the work was not done. Kanny continued the effort. When the Commission on Education of the Deaf (COED) appointed by the U.S. Congress in 1986 included among their recommendations that ASL be included under the Bilingual Education Act, the NAD established a new committee on ASL and COED¹⁵. Kanny and Melvia Nomeland were appointed co-chairs and developed a position paper on ASL and Bilingual Education which was subsequently approved in 1993.

Kanny was also instrumental in establishing the Deaf Studies program at Gallaudet. She served on a taskforce co-chaired by Yerker Andersson and William C. Stokoe, to explore the feasibility of offering this as a program at Gallaudet. Deaf Studies was established as a department in 1994.

When The Bicultural Center (TBC) was established by MJ and Betty Colonos, Kanny was thrilled and proved to be a loyal supporter. She brought her expertise with Deafpride to the Center and provided workshops to the community. As a member of TBC News editorial board, Kanny not only reviewed articles for the newsletter, but contributed her own as well. For over four decades, Kanny never wavered from her mission to formalize recognition of ASL and Deaf culture as the core identity of the American Deaf community.

Validating the Rainbow Community

While Kanny was a Deaf person who cherished her native language and culture, she also had other identities that were equally as important to her. She was a woman. And she was a lesbian. While she at first hid her lesbian identity, fearing ostracization from the Deaf community, she came to embrace this identity and became a model for others in the Rainbow community. As MJ recalled, Kanny in the 1980s, collaborated with the late Clayton Valli, esteemed ASL poet and linguist, to provide “Lavender Linguistics” to the local DC Deaf LGBTQ+ community. When the AIDS epidemic became prevalent, Kanny and Clayton shifted their focus to educating the community about AIDS. As an open lesbian, Kanny was sought out to provide support and encouragement. Her efforts were recognized when she was honored as the keynote presenter at the 2017 Gallaudet Lavender Graduation.

Deaf Women United

“When we realize how we have accepted outside definitions of ourselves, we begin to create our definitions, focusing on our strengths as Deaf women. Within our language and our culture, we begin to focus on our development as women.”

- Kannapell, 1999, p. 81

Though Kanny spent much of her journey on advocating for bilingualism, she recognized that her other identities were just as critical. Just as she advocated for Deaf people’s language rights, she also saw the importance of Deaf women defining themselves, rather than accepting societal definitions of Deaf women. This belief is illustrated in the following event.

When Kathy Jankowski started working at Deafpride, she heard all about Kanny. When they did meet, they struck up a friendship that would last for the next 37 years. They worked on several projects together. One such project was the second Deaf Women United conference. Deafpride had enthusiastically agreed to host this conference.

Kanny, Eileen (Paul), and Kathy wanted to design a conference where Deaf women could truly focus on themselves and their unique experiences. Along with an amazing conference committee, they worked to bring diverse Deaf women together in a safe zone to share their individual stories. The conference was an awesome experience and truly empowered Deaf women to focus on their identities as diverse Deaf women. As such, Deaf women had defined themselves exactly the way Kanny thought they should.

Other Significant Contributions

Despite her broad range of contributions to the Deaf community, Kanny struggled with alcohol in her early life. She became sober and celebrated her 50th year of sobriety prior to her death. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was a critical source of support to Kanny and she gave back by helping to form Deaf AA groups and arranging for interpreters for their meetings.

In her later years, Kanny developed an interest in studying the impact of World War II on Deaf people. Because many hearing men were involved in military efforts and not able to work, defense factories had too many vacancies they needed to fill. This presented a unique situation when they sought out Deaf workers. Kanny collected extensive data and artifacts about Deaf workers during these war years. One such example was an ad posted by Firestone with the heading, “Competent Deaf Workers Men and Women Urgently Needed” (Kannapell, 2020). Kanny’s effort with this project was to illustrate how the Deaf community was strengthened and made a difference during World War II.

While her activism and efforts to make the world a more equitable place for Deaf people would appear to have been more than a full-time job, it is hard to imagine that she also worked. She was employed at Gallaudet for 25 years, as a research assistant and linguistics specialist. She also taught ASL and Deaf culture at Gallaudet and the Community College of Baltimore County and as a Deaf culture consultant.

Widely acclaimed, Kanny’s tireless efforts over the years were recognized with numerous awards and honors.



Figure 5: Kanny and Eileen.
Courtesy of Eileen Paul.

Personal Life

Despite a busy schedule through much of her life, Kanny enjoyed relaxing with her family. She and her spouse, Eileen always had several pets, usually a dog and several cats. They enjoyed watching movies with their pets sitting close by. Kanny was a Star Wars fan and looked forward to each new segment. She also loved football and rooted for the Washington Commanders.

Kanny and Eileen enjoyed their annual vacations at Cape Cod where they visited art galleries, ate seafood, and watched the beautiful sunsets. Kanny always knew how to have a good time. She and Eileen regularly hosted dinners during holidays and gathered with friends at restaurants to celebrate their birthdays. They also frequented restaurants with close friends. They also welcomed international guests who were in town with gatherings at their home. So many happy times, so many great memories...



Figure 6: Kathy and Kanny sharing a humorous moment at the sand dunes in Provincetown, MA.
Courtesy of Kathy Jankowski.

Keeping the Flame Alive

“It is our language in every sense of the word. We create it, we keep it alive, and it keeps us and our traditions alive.”

- Kannapell, 1982, p. 26

We owe much gratitude to Barbara Kannapell, Nathie Marbury, and Marie Philip who blazed trails so we could keep our beloved and beautiful language alive, so we could be free to converse in our natural language, and so that there would be no restrictions on what Deaf children learn in the classroom. They have now passed the torch over to another generation who will build on what they accomplished and create even more paths until we achieve full equality.

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