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DeafNation carries loud message

By Maria Natale
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As Foothill High School students sifted through the crowd at the DeafNation Expo Saturday at the Alameda County Fairgrounds, their conversations were quiet, but far from dull, accented by intricate hand gestures and warm smiles.

Foothill junior Katie Surles said that it was overwhelming at first to see people signing so fast. She said that people are willing to slow down once she explains that she is still learning the language.

And to Surles -- whose hearing works fine -- sign language is just like any other language one can learn in school. She tried taking French, but for her, "it didn't work." But she feels American Sign Language will ultimately serve her well in her hopeful career, as a veterinarian who caters to the deaf community.

She and the other Foothill teens are studying American Sign Language to fulfill their high school foreign language requirement. Their teacher, Pleasanton resident Howard Gilliland, encouraged them to attend the Expo so they could experience first hand what they are learning in the classroom.

"It's a good eye-opening experience for them," said Gilliland, who is deaf.

Now in its third year, the DeafNation Expo educates both deaf and hearing people about the latest technological advances, products and services that are available to the deaf community.

According to Joel Barish, the chief executive officer of DeafNation, such advances help increase awareness and acceptance of deaf people in the community and the business world in particular.

Barish, who is deaf, said that when he worked in a coffee shop and travel store, he had to communicate with hearing customers solely via e-mail. Now, there are several different relay options for improved communication.

For example, Sorenson Communications provides a video relay service and has a call center located in Pleasanton. Improved technology allows a deaf person to use a video transmitter to speak with an interpreter, who then simultaneously relays the message to a hearing person via telephone. The company is reimbursed by the Federal Communications Commission for minutes used, so the service is free for deaf people.

Barish said services like those provided by Sorenson allow him to conduct business at a faster pace than he was able to do before. With the new technology, Barish said, deaf people can become more involved in business, and in turn, people who can hear will learn more about the deaf.

"It does take time," said Barish, "but we are getting there."

As a company based in Frederick, Md., DeafNation is doing its part to promote the advancement of deaf products and services throughout the country. The DeafNation Expo visits 12 cities nationwide throughout the year. Over 4,000 people attended the Pleasanton event, making it one of the largest DeafNation events in the country. Barish said the events are free to attendees so that everyone has equal access to the information.

The company also produces a series of Internet television shows called DeafNationTV. Programs range from travel features to personal profiles to world news events to deaf sporting events, all of which are meant to educate and entertain.

DeafNation also supports deaf charities such as Hayward's DeafHope, a nonprofit organization that works to end domestic violence and sexual assault against deaf women and children in Northern California.

This year, DeafNation sponsored a charity golf tournament that was held last Thursday at Poppy Ridge Golf Course in Livermore. The event raised \$18,000 for DeafHope.

Julie Rems-Smario, executive director of DeafHope, said her group was surprised and honored to receive such an overwhelming response from the community. She added that the event was the first charity golf tournament in Northern California that was organized by and benefited deaf people.

Pleasanton resident Marnee Hoecker is a deaf person who works for DeafHope. She said the DeafNation Expo benefits the Tri-Valley because it helps educate the hearing people who live here.

She mentioned that since both Foothill and Amador Valley high schools have American Sign Language classes, students attend the DeafNation event to learn not only about the language but also about the culture and the opportunities that are available to them as sign language interpreters.

"To read it is one thing; to see it (in person) is different," Hoecker said.

Gilliland said that students will tell him how they were able to help deaf people in the community by translating for them at a

store counter or restaurant, for example. He said that those interactions make both him and the students feel satisfied.

Having a deaf-friendly community is an advantage, Hoecker said, because, "The more people who can sign, the more communication there will be."

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