



# ICDF Networks

## November 2019

### Ability Not Disability



The story of Helen Keller is well-known. Born in 1880, Helen Keller was only 19 months old when she lost her sight and hearing due to an unknown illness. At the age of 7, Helen met Anne Mansfield Sullivan who taught her to use her hands to interpret and connect with the world. She was an intelligent person and graduated from college, the first deaf and blind person to do so. Throughout her life she was committed to the cause of furthering the rights of women and people with disabilities.

In 1954 she visited the dance studio of Martha Graham where she also interacted with the dancers in her quest to understand movement. An historic video of one such a visit can be seen at ...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNxRiJnSVTg>

Another interesting memory is that of Merce Cunningham who “showed” her what it means to jump ...

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/10/22/helen-keller-martha-graham/>

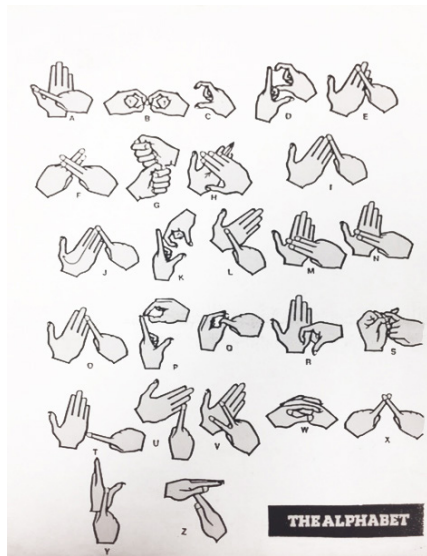
The photo above was taken at the time of her visit and shows Graham and Keller standing in the centre with the dancers moving in a circle around them.

## Signing - a beautiful expression for the deaf

The Gospel (Good News of God's Love) bridges the gap between any cultural divide and Sign Language, apparently, does the same.

Years ago I was worshipping at my church via dance and sign and for the umpteenth time a male, suited, church member came to me to tell me that although he had been brought up with emphasis on the British Stiff upper lip, he found whenever he "saw" what he "heard" in worship he went to a much deeper place in his heart, with God. I find this wonderfully encouraging for we see that a bridge is being spanned across a hindering chasm between men and their God. What a lie to teach little boys that it is weak to show emotion....for even Jesus wept.  
Prejudice indeed.

Equal in prejudice was my naive assumption that a group of deaf ladies worshipping in church on the platform were totally dependant on ME to keep time. I sat on the front row beating time on an invisible drum.....but they never looked my way, they were lost in the dance, and never lost timing once!! I stopped beating my invisible drum and later asked: "How did you do that....Keep time without my direction?" They responded, " Oh it's easy to keep time. We feel/hear the beat and rhythm through vibration in our chest."



Amazing God. He made other systems that work when a part of our physical being does not.

One word of caution. Always ask a deaf person if they want to be healed of deafness. I know it sounds unbelievable to those of us that know "sound" but many do not want the noise of our world in their heads. They are accustomed to silence and really aren't interested in hearing with their ears. Be sensitive and don't think ALL deaf people desire healing.

I know Jesus healed many of deafness but maybe he found out what THEY really wanted, first? What deaf people actually DO desire, though, is for the hearing community to include them in life and relationship. To make church accessible to them, too! To acknowledge they are extremely intelligent individuals who manage to survive in our world in spite of very little assistance from "normal" people, and they long for us to not relate to them as though they are sub-intelligent.

They are AMAZING!! Let's affirm that and educate the world!

*Linda Wells* - Coordinator for the ICDF Network for Deaf Signing

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"ASL Mother" by Eloise Schneider Mote  
(ASL: American Sign Language; Source: web)

## Dancing in Wheelchairs

At the “Out Of Africa” studio we have been working with wheelchair dancers for the past 6 years. We challenge our artists to erase the line between “disability” and “non-disability” and strive for innovation. As a teacher you do not notice the wheelchair any longer as dancers have taken their ability to another level. Building the upper strength of the dancer ultimately assists with building character when doing partner dancing. We aim to use dance as a vehicle to empower people and eliminate the stigma associated with disability.

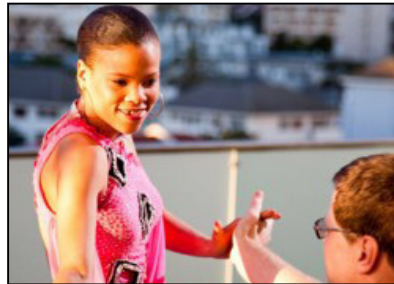


Hip Hop dancing has become the ultimate favourite for the differently abled person as they can explore with their wheelchairs when dancing in a group with abled bodied dancers. The wheelchairs can be used to conduct freezes and the abled bodied can jump from them to incorporate the differently abled dancers. In so doing an exciting choreography is created. The dancers know that they are part of a bigger picture and definitely bring their “A” game.

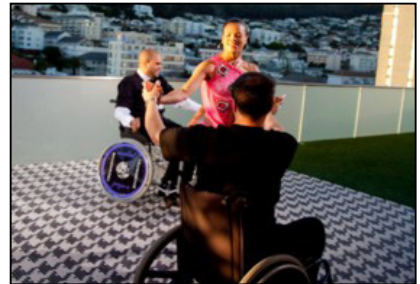
*Jay Meyer*



*Jason Meyer teaching upper strength and Hip Hop moves and the abled bodied joining in to create a ripple effect*



*Ballroom dancers*



*Rehearsals for “Dreams Into Reality” show*

When we do the best we can, we never know what miracle is wrought in our life, or in the life of another.  
- Helen Keller



## Teaching Dance to the Visually Challenged



At the Dance & Culture Study Tour in India, Jesica Sinniah showed the techniques that she uses to help her visually challenged students to perform Bharatanatyam and how through this dance form she teaches them to communicate. She used the music and lyrics of a 2 minute song to demonstrate the 'touch me and learn' technique of teaching dance moves. Barbara Wood writes ...

“ I went to Jesica’s class for teaching visually impaired girls. I was interested to see how she taught the girls to dance, given that most of them had very impaired vision. I dance myself and was intrigued to find out how they maintained their balance. I find it much more difficult to balance with my eyes closed. The secret is of course, practise, practise, practise.

Before Jesica started teaching, she told the girls how far away the walls were, the location of the windows and doors, what obstructions there were – such as chairs and benches. Each child introduced herself. They spoke clearly and were very thrilled to be able to dance. We learnt some of the moves for the Bharatanatyam dance, which is a classic dance in India. Jesica got the girls to demonstrate the different ways to ‘speak’ using their hands and the normal position to start Bharatanatyam – i.e. squatting right down, knees out wide, one leg out straight with the toes up and hands with palms flat and the fingers curved. Just try it – but only when your body is well warmed up!!

They then danced and I have to say it was very emotional to see them moving so beautifully and so co-ordinated. They very rarely bumped into each other.

After they had danced we asked them questions and approached them so that, having introduced ourselves, they could feel our face shapes and our hair. I asked one of them how to hold your hand in the correct position. Even though she couldn’t see my hands, she immediately said that I must keep the palm of my hand completely flat before curving my fingers, with the little finger highest. I found it well nigh impossible so I will have to keep practising.

We were all moved by the dignity and ability of these girls – bright, intelligent and passionate about dancing. Many thanks to Jesica for her dedication to these girls and the love she shows towards them.”

*Barbara Wood*



## Dance 21 ... dancing with Down Syndrome

One of the most fun dance classes I teach is with the Dance 21 group. Dance 21 is a charity based in the east of England that runs dance classes for children and young adults with Down Syndrome. Originally set up by the parents of some of the youngsters who saw their love for dancing but could not find an appropriate dance class.

I have been teaching Dance 21 for over 3 years. It is different to most classes because things that many dancers take for granted, like rhythm or balance, take a lot longer to learn but no one can surpass their enthusiasm! One of the main purposes of the group is to be totally inclusive which does create challenges choreographing and we have to do a lot of repetition, but once they have got a dance it is never forgotten.

Over the last year I have also been able to include them in dance shows I have performed in the local community. The energy and joy they brought to the show was amazing. The last show I did with them was part of my InterDEPENDance Tour at the beginning of the year so, not only were we able to choreograph lighting cues, but they were able to perform alongside professional dancers which saw them raise their dancing to a new level.

I have learnt not to give up - just explain it again in a different way - and to not underestimate them because, whatever their disability, when you find a move or music they love they will excel.

*Steven Turner*

