



PHOTOS BY MA SONG/THE STAR LEDGER

Lolata Greggs teaches American Sign Language at the Newark Public Library. The class meets on Saturdays.



Greggs shows her student, Justin Outlaw, 6, the right way to sign his name.



The deaf have an endearing ambassador

Library assistant volunteers to teach sign language

AROUND TOWN



BARRY CARTER

It's quiet in the African-American room at the Newark Public Library. Not because people are reading. It's because they are talking with their hands. They are communicating in American Sign Language.

The silence ends when students clap, the first sign of noise other than the sound of the air conditioner. It happens after

classmates have finger-spelled their names correctly. The applause signifies approval, sort of like an award for also having the courage to stand before others and do it.

Everybody participates here on Saturdays. Adults, teenagers, children. Nobody gets to hide from the teacher, Lolata Greggs, a library assistant who is deaf.

Greggs, 34, lost her hearing when she was 4 years old, but she is fluent now in sign language. She doesn't get paid to teach the free class. She volunteers to do so. It's her way to help people understand that sign language is a language, a way to communicate.

When she's teaching, Greggs wants the class members to learn, to come away with

an experience that helps them relate to the deaf community. In 90 minutes, Greggs is busy covering topics from name spelling to numbers, days of the week to months of the year, members of the family to colors in the rainbow.

The class requires that you be involved, and Greggs has everyone participate. She scans the room, looking around to see who hasn't had a turn.

"I'm not ready," a woman said.

One by one, they all have to come to the front. Some are eager, some are not. But that's not a problem. Greggs has a charming personality, an endearing quality that puts the class at ease.

It comes through in her body language. She uses her hands, letting them know it's all right, that we're all friends here. Her facial expressions, especially her eyes, draw you in and make you feel comfortable. Everything she does conveys a thought you can easily decipher.

"C'mon. You can do it."

"Noooooo. Try again."

She smiles with approval when they get it, frowns out of surprise when they don't. But every step of the way, she's encouraging, upbeat, positive. Then she rubs her hands together as if she's ready to cook up something new, then has the class start again.

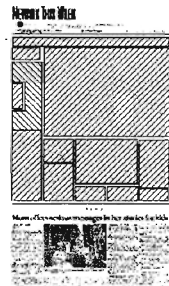
Greggs said she has to be this way, expressive, that is. It's necessary for the deaf community to get its point across.

"It's natural for me," she said.

She's a friendly person, very likable but always in control, having at times to remind the class that they must not talk.

"Shhhhh," she says.

Greggs can hear when people are talking and understands what they say. She reads lips well, too, if you're close by. Her speech is clear enough to follow, but she



signs mostly, speaking when necessary.

Five years have passed since Greggs volunteered to teach the class when a library grant expired. She was a little nervous at first, but felt a need to continue the service. Under her direction, the weekend course started with family members of the deaf, then it grew to include nurses, social workers, college students and others interested in learning.

"She just stepped in," said Margaret George, a principal librarian in the special services room of the library.

"Whatever needs to be done, she does it," George says. "She's highly dependable and responsible, which is the mark of a real good person."

Gregg is a real good worker, an employee who wears many hats as a library assistant. She moves throughout several departments, ordering books, arranging them, putting things back in their place.

If there's a problem with a computer program, she has the knack and know-how to troubleshoot and get it running. So doing another job, especially one that gives her immense joy, was not a heavy lift at all. Teaching people sign language gives her an opportunity not only to help the public, but to assist parents in communicating with their children who are deaf.

Greggs, an East Orange resident, has been with the library 14 years. She began volunteering at the main branch when her mother called, inquiring about services for the deaf.

Greggs, who spent most of her childhood with her grandmother in Georgetown, S.C., had just graduated from the South Carolina School for the Deaf in Spartanburg when she came back to New Jersey in 1993. Her mother, anxious to keep Greggs busy, started out checking with state agencies and vocational programs until she found out about the library's services.

Someday, Greggs said, she would like to open a school for the deaf, but it's just a thought for now. She loves what she's doing and the students like her style. She's interactive, demonstrative, shows them short cuts or slang, if you will, on how she signs.

"I wasn't expecting anything like this," said Jenna Hicks. "She made it really

easy."

Easy enough for everyone to break the silence with applause.

Barry Carter covers Newark. He may be reached at bcarter@starledger.com or (973)-392-1827.

