A Town for the Deaf

Would a town where sign language is the norm be a boon to deaf people—or further isolate them from the rest of society?

Standing in an empty field along a windswept highway in South Dakota, Marvin T. Miller, who is deaf, and his mother-in-law, M.E. Barwacz, who is not, envision the town they want to create here: a place built around American Sign Language, where teachers will sign, the town council will hold its debates in sign language, and restaurant workers will be required to know how to sign orders.

Nearly 100 families from as far away as Australia have already declared their intention to live in Miller and Barwacz's village, to be called Laurent, after Laurent Clerc, a French educator of the deaf from the 1800s. The families include people who are deaf or hard of hearing, or who can hear but just want to communicate in sign language.

"Society isn't doing that great a job of, quote-unquote, integrating us," says Miller, 33. "My children don't see [deaf] role models in their lives: mayors, factory managers, postal workers, business owners. So we're setting up a place to show our unique culture, our unique society."

GLASS & OPEN SPACES

While deaf enclaves have cropped up throughout the nation, this would be the first town expressly created for people who sign, its developers say. The homes and businesses would incorporate glass and open space for easy

By Monica Davey in Salem, South Dakota

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE would be the preferred mode of communication in Laurent.
Deaf?

visibility across wide distances. Fire and police services would be designed with more lights and fewer sirens. And shops, businesses, and restaurants would be required to be sign-language friendly.

In Salem, a farming town of 1,300 people three miles from the proposed site of Laurent, people seem unsure of what to make of the idea. Some wonder how the proposed town of 2,500 would mesh with McCook County's economy of corn, cows, and pigs. Others doubt Laurent will ever become a reality.

**A CONTENTIOUS IDEA**

And, in the complicated political world of deaf culture, Laurent is an increasingly contentious idea. For some—like Miller; his wife, Jennifer, who is also deaf; and their four deaf children—it seems the simplest of wishes: to live in a place where they are fully engaged in day-to-day life. Others, however, particularly advocates of technologies that help deaf people use spoken language, wonder whether such a town would merely isolate and exclude the deaf more than ever.

"We think there is a greater benefit for people to be part of the whole world," says Todd Houston, executive director of the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Washington, D.C. "I understand the desire to be around people like ourselves, and I don't have a problem with that, but I don't think it's very wise."

Over the past 15 years, Houston says, it has become easier for the deaf and hard of hearing to grow up using spoken language. He cites a steady rise in the use of cochlear implants (electronic devices surgically implanted in the inner ear that can in many cases restore partial hearing to the deaf), more early diagnoses and therapies for deaf children, and efforts to place some deaf children in mainstream schools.

That change has set off intense political debate over what it means to be deaf and what mode of communication—signing or talking—the deaf should focus on.

**MANY SCHOOLS** now offer American Sign Language as an alternative to studying a foreign language.

Those who want to live in Laurent, though, say their intent is not exclusivity, but the inclusion of diverse people, especially those who do not have the luxury of communicating with speech.

Lawrence J. Brick, a retired school administrator from Philadelphia, says Laurent holds attractions that most hearing people would struggle to grasp: no longer having to shy away from the neighbors, fearing he could not communicate; no longer having to guess what a store clerk is saying about a price; no longer having to apologize for being deaf.

**'HAPPY BEING DEAF'**

But Dr. Michael Novak of Urbana, Ill., who has been performing cochlear implants since 1984, is convinced that the trend among the deaf is actually shifting toward therapies that could help the next generation of deaf people use

speaking language—and that the appeal of a town for sign-language users might fade away.

For his part, though, Miller says reports of the "death of sign language and deaf culture continue to be greatly exaggerated." Not everyone, he says, is eligible for or would even want to receive technologies like cochlear implants. "I do not want one for myself," says Miller. "I am very happy being deaf. To me, this is like asking a black or Asian person if he/she would take a pill to turn into a white person."

Monica Davey is a correspondent in The Times' Chicago bureau.