

Posted on Mon, Nov. 17, 2003

Academy for deaf gets a home at last

'It will be our place, our school, our house.'

By Neil Strassman
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

ARLINGTON - The state's only charter school for children who have hearing impairments is putting down roots in Arlington.

The Jean Massieu Academy bought the 4.4-acre North Side Baptist Church on Center Street last month for \$865,000, ending five years of wandering the Metroplex in search of a permanent location.

The new campus will have more than 43,000 square feet of classroom and assembly space, an athletic field, a parking lot that can be converted to a playground, and three small houses.

"It is a beautiful thing to know the school can stay in one place." said Sue Hill, the academy's founder and chief operating officer. Hill, 47, who was born deaf, has been teaching and supervising since 1979.

The open-enrollment academy teaches prekindergarten through grade 12 in American Sign Language and English, which is considered bilingual education for students who are deaf. About 160 students attend the day school -- one-third have no hearing impairment but have parents or siblings who are deaf.

"It will be our place, our school, our house," said



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Sharing lunchtime gossip at Jean Massieu Academy are Dariana Gaston, 9, left, and Danita Wells, 11. The charter school hopes to begin next school year at its new campus at a former church in Arlington.



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Jean Massieu Academy business manager Bobby Dunivan and Sue Hill, the school's chief operating officer, look over plans for the church property in Arlington that will become the permanent home for the charter school.

Krystal Johnson, 12, a seventh-grader who has attended the school since it was organized five years ago.

"All the teachers can sign; the hearing and the deaf students can sign. There's really good communication," said Johnson, of North Richland Hills, who wants to be a pediatrician.

The academy opened in 1999 with about 20 students in Irving, moved to rented space in a Duncanville church, and then to the leased Family Life Center at First Church of the Nazarene on Pioneer Parkway in Arlington.

"We have books, but no place to keep them," Hill said. "Now we can have a library, science labs, a theater program and so much more."

Enrollment could swell to more than 500 students, Hill said. The easy access to Interstate 30 is important because students come from at least 16 Metroplex school districts, traveling from east of Dallas and west of Fort Worth.

The academy, which cannot charge tuition, spends between \$4,000 and \$5,000 per student, Hill said. The school gets \$1.2 million for operating expenses and an additional \$300,000 for transportation costs from the Texas Education Agency, as well as \$50,000 in federal money, Hill said.

Since it opened, the academy has received \$200,000 in donations and \$400,000 in grants, she said.

Named for Jean Massieu, a French educator who was deaf and who pioneered educational programs for the deaf two centuries ago, the academy was formed to provide an alternative to public school programs, school officials said.

There is a long-standing debate among educators of those who are deaf regarding providing a bilingual education -- American Sign Language, which has its own syntax, and other sign languages that use ASL signs and other signs to more closely approximate English letters, word order and syntax.



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Science teacher Melissa Knouse, right, discusses lessons with 10th-grader Tasha Anderson at Jean Massieu Academy. The school's 160 students now share cramped quarters, but the planned relocation will allow room to grow.

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The bilingual environment, with everyone capable of using American Sign Language and learning English, "removes communication barriers that normally exist for deaf and hard of hearing students within the traditional public school systems," the school says in a statement of purpose on its Web site.

Bilingual communication has "greatly benefited and enhanced our students' academic performances"; they also "benefit from exposure to the large number of professional deaf or hard of hearing adult role models" available to them, the statement says.

Throughout Texas, the state pays for specialized education programs for those who are deaf in public school districts. Most use some combination of American Sign Language and forms of signed English, program directors in Arlington and Fort Worth said.

Kim Koepke, curriculum coordinator for the Arlington Regional Day School Program for the Deaf, said the Jean Massieu Academy will give parents greater choice in educating their children.

Some students already have gone "back and forth" between the Arlington school district and the academy, she said.

In Arlington schools, 41 students are directly served by trained teachers of the deaf and 60 to 100 more students are "mainstreamed" and attending regular classes, she said.

The Fort Worth school district serves more than 200 students, including many from outlying school districts, program coordinator Lisa Stewart said.

"Fort Worth has a total communication philosophy -- using all means of getting communication and language into the child, and that means using ASL, signed English, gestures and other methods, but we lean more heavily toward signed English," Stewart said.

When Grady Laird was the only deaf student in a public school class, he said, sometimes he felt ignored.

"They didn't focus much on me because I was the only deaf student in the class," said Laird, 15, of south Arlington. "I would read lips a little; they would give me written notes and instructions, and I would read books."

Laird said he is more comfortable and has learned more at the academy than he did in public school.

On a recent visit, students were giggling and animated in the academy cafeteria, making it look like any school lunch room, but for the constant flurry of hands signing stories, mischief and wisecracks.

The state provides operating money for charter schools such as the academy, but not money for capital expenses such as land or buildings.

The academy hopes to begin the next school year at its new campus, but it will take eight months and more than \$200,000 to turn the vintage 1951 church property into the school it must become, business manager Bobby Dunivan said.

The North Side Baptist Church has changed its name to the King's Brook Church, a Christian Life Center, and is moving to a new location near I-30 and Eastchase Parkway.

At the old facility, a fire prevention sprinkler system needs to be installed, hallways must be widened, doors fixed, walls painted and an elevator or two added, Dunivan said.

Academy board member Rick Lloyd, whose son attends the school, said there needs to be a fund-raising campaign.

Because the academy is moving from a leased space to a permanent home, the school needs "anything and everything" -- building supplies, carpet, office furniture, desks and other things, said Lloyd, who is also the supervisor of painting and signs at the University of Texas at Arlington.

Most important, he said, the new campus will "alleviate parents' fears that the school won't be there," that it could close.

"This is what we've been seeking for several years," Lloyd said.

"This is manna from heaven,"

For information

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