

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

## Imagining a Deaf Utopia



Abigail J Rosenthal

In the summer of 2005, I drove to rural South Dakota to visit the offices of the Laurent Company, whose aim was to build a town for the deaf. By the time I moved there to begin my field work in 2007, the company was bankrupt, plans for Laurent had been abandoned, and the proposed founders had moved to Indiana and placed their children in the Indiana School for the Deaf. Instead of the deaf Mecca I had been chasing, I found myself in a state that would shortly be closing down instructional programs at its own dedicated school for the deaf.

The South Dakota School for the Deaf (SDSD) had been an emotional and practical center-point for the deaf in South Dakota since its founding in 1880. Local deaf activism and fundraising always seemed to circle back around to the school: the Deaf Sertoma Club sold potatoes by the hundredweight to raise money for a scoreboard in the gymnasium; the South Dakota Association for the Deaf and a local deaf-run business raised almost \$300,000 to buy a plot of SDSD's land and historical buildings that the state had put up for sale. So its closure came as something of a surprise, even though administrators, parents, and members of the deaf community had been worrying about declining enrollment since the mid-1970s.

How could the deaf community, locally and nationally, be vibrant enough to attract interest in a town for the deaf, but in such decline that it could no longer support a dedicated school? Perhaps I had merely been suckered by the Laurent Company and there was no such interest. Or maybe the state was acting in bad faith, neglecting what could have been a viable school and forcing its closure.

The answer to this paradox lay in one of my original research questions about Laurent: who would have lived there? How could one imagine, let alone enforce, a town filled with just deaf people? But the town was not supposed to be *of* the deaf, but *for* the deaf—a place where deaf people would not feel ostracized or stigmatized, would not be excluded from civic participation because they used American Sign Language or needed an interpreter. In a comment on the [Laurent Company's blog](#), one of the co-founders (a hearing woman with a deaf daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren) clarified their mission of creating a town where language would not be a barrier for either deaf or hearing:

Laurent has never been planned or presented as a town for only deaf. If you think about it, few families have only deaf members. Most have deaf, hearing and maybe even hard of hearing. Signing, [sic] is the common link we share.

As many as 95% of deaf children are born to two hearing parents, and while fewer statistics are available, over 90% of deaf parents are estimated to have hearing children. In a large, sparsely populated state like South Dakota, deaf children growing up with a hearing family might have few chances to meaningfully interact with deaf peers or adults: in 2008, in 33 of the state's 66 counties, there were between one and five deaf students in the entire county, and in 12 others, there were no deaf students at all. Dedicated schools for the deaf give children a chance to learn to sign, to get specialized education, and to interact with peers without feeling that their deafness is a stigma or their defining characteristic.

Parents deciding between sending their children to SDSD or keeping them in local schools were driven by many of the same conflicting desires that inspired other families to consider uprooting their lives and moving to Laurent. They wanted to find some bridge between deaf and hearing worlds. Many parents of deaf children, be they hearing or deaf themselves, are attracted to the aforementioned advantages of a dedicated school, but they also highly value keeping their child in the family home. This was the conundrum Laurent promised to resolve—raising a child in a world designed *for* the deaf but with space for the existing family unit.

Given that no space quite like Laurent exists, families handle this trade-off differently. A mother and ASL teacher in South Dakota explained her choice to send her teenage son to the Iowa School for the Deaf; she did not feel he was getting enough interaction with peers or even teachers who were fluent in ASL due to SDSD's declining enrollment and ability to attract well qualified teachers. She lobbied for better resources, but finally sent him away: "He is living with a stranger, but he is getting a good education and he is happy." As the actions of the intended founder of Laurent showed, other families have moved en masse to enable their children to go to dedicated schools but still live with their families. But these choices are unusual. Local public schools have become more attractive because they have received increased resources for special education (a result of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). For most of the parents of the 400 deaf children living in South Dakota, sending a deaf child to a dedicated school for the deaf was not worth the sacrifice of home residence.

Laurent was the dream of what its founders termed "the world's first fully integrated town." But the slowly declining enrollment at SDSD has been the reality of

compromise, and one that has tilted towards more families choosing to keep their child closer to home. The resultant mainstreaming of deaf students—also in pursuit of integration, albeit on different terms—will undoubtedly be consequential for both those students and for the deaf community as a whole, although in ways that are as yet unknown.

Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA contributing editors **Aaron Ansell** ([aansell@vt.edu](mailto:aansell@vt.edu)) or **Bonnie Urciuoli** ([burciuol@hamilton.edu](mailto:burciuol@hamilton.edu)).

Share this:



This entry was posted in [April, Section News](#) and tagged [Society for Linguistic Anthropology](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). [Post a comment](#) or leave a trackback: [Trackback URL](#).