

Mid-Atlantic Sister Helps People Who Are Deaf-Blind

When Bernadette Wynne, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community, was a teenager, she volunteered at a home for people who are blind. Today, she serves people who are blind and deaf.

Sister Bernie, coordinator of the national training team of the Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youth and Adults in Sands Point, NY, trains the staff at agencies that serve the deaf-blind population in the United States and overseas.

“Almost half of this population starts out as deaf, and sign language is their primary language,” says Sister Bernie, who has worked at the center for 35 years. “Once they begin to lose their vision, they need to learn new skills to regain their independence.” She says mobility skills are a high priority. Clients are trained to walk safely with another person, how to use a white walking cane or work with a guide dog.

The Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youth and Adults is a national rehabilitation program serving youth and adults who are deaf-blind.

One of the primary challenges, she says, is that there are state agencies for the deaf and agencies for the blind, and the deaf-blind can “get lost” between the two organizations. “The deaf-blind person needs skills taught at the blind agency such as Braille and mobility and independent living skills,” Sister Bernie says.

If a person is born blind, they cannot learn sign language because it is a spatial language and they have no concept of space or shape. “The staff can use alternative communication methods, and that’s what I teach them,” Sister Bernie says. One method is tactile signing, which requires signing directly into a person’s hand. she adds that learning Braille can be challenging for a deaf person because English is not their native language.

For people who are deaf, she says losing their sight is the “most horrible terror because their eyes are their eyes, their ears, their link to the world.” “It’s a terrible situation because fear is not logical; it’s emotional,” Sister Bernie adds.

“Usher syndrome is the primary cause of deaf-blindness, and it is a genetic condition where a person is born deaf or hard of hearing and then blindness develops in the teen years,” she says. “If Usher syndrome is diagnosed early, young people can begin learning how to cope with vision loss.”

One of the biggest misconceptions about deaf-blind people is that they can't do anything. "They accomplish great things," Sister Bernie says. "When they come up with an idea that sounds far fetched, I say, 'OK, try it.' I have been so inspired by them, by their courage, by their stamina."

Getting vital information during natural disasters or emergencies is a primary challenge for deaf-blind people. Sister Bernie explains that National Public Radio is partnering with the Helen Keller National Center to develop Braille Radio, which will convert speech to text information and translate it into Braille through an electronic Braille device. According to the NPR Web site, "the device utilizes rows of pins that move up and down to create Braille characters and are designed to plug into the radio."

As a Sister of Mercy, Sister Bernie says she enjoys the opportunity to provide spiritual guidance to her clients. "I've planned weddings and memorial services, and I've prepared several students who wanted to receive their sacraments," she says.

Just as Catherine McAuley reached out to the forgotten in Dublin, Sister Bernie says the deaf-blind are "a forgotten population in the world, not just in America." Sister Bernie regularly travels across the United States and to several countries, including Finland, Poland and Peru. "When I entered the convent in 1952, I didn't travel at all," she says. "Now I travel everywhere."

Reflecting on her ministry to people who are deaf-blind, Sister Bernie says she is proud of the impact her ministry has made in their lives. "We help the deaf-blind reshape their lives," she says. "We never close a case. People come to us and we train them. When they lose more hearing, lose their vision or lose their job, we continue to help them.

"When I retire, I can look back and say, 'Wow, this was a good run.'"