

Year-End Report 2002
SignWriting in 2003

Born-deaf people, and those who become deaf as young children, are an overlooked minority around the globe. Some may never have heard words. Usually there is difficulty learning to read words. In many countries, there is no special education for them. And even in those countries that do have special education, attaining an advanced reading level is rare. Imagine the isolation a deaf person feels when there is no way offered to write a letter or read a book in one's native language, Sign Language. For a young child without hearing, the spoken language of his country is a second language and often words on the page have no meaning.

This predicament is vividly described in the New York Times story, Sunday, April 14, 2002, entitled *Another Language For The Deaf*. Since SignWriting is not a language but a writing system, a more accurate title would have been *Written Language For The Deaf*. An excellent article, it clearly shows the way SignWriting acts as a bridge to words for a frustrated deaf child. You sense the confidence she gains as she finally grasps the meaning of words. For her SignWriting seems to be the open sesame... Colorful books and inviting software make learning fun for her, as for countless other children, world-wide.



SignWriting in Saudi Arabia

But the New York Times article could not tell all of this far-ranging story -- not space enough to mention that never before in history has there been an "alphabet" for writing movements of fingers, arms and facial expressions. It was in 1974 that Valerie Sutton launched Sutton

Movement Writing. From it SignWriting emerged--a giant leap for literacy where there had been little hope before. Now used in 27 countries, it is the deaf children who lead their skeptical teachers and parents into realization that SignWriting works! From the jungles of Nicaragua to the sands of Arabia, documents pour in attesting to the joy of achievement where before there had been scant success. From every country, each with its own sign languages and dialects, comes video and anecdote showing the usefulness of SignWriting, documented on the world wide web.



SignWriting in Nicaragua

Now the website, www.SignWriting.org, has been made available on CDs. Thanks to the technical skill of Bill Reese, an enthusiastic deaf supporter of SignWriting, it is now possible to view the web site without using the internet. Either way offers a wealth of information, instruction and materials, much of it cost-free. Many outstanding leaders have contributed their expertise so that SignWriting can serve Deaf people more completely. The list of these generous and gifted participants is long and greatly valued, but only a few can be mentioned here, at this time.



SignWriting in South Africa

Among them in the United States, is Dr. Cecilia Flood. Since 1998 Dr. Flood has been leading the country in extensive research on SignWriting, finding it an invaluable teaching tool in the education of deaf children. She has introduced SignWriting in the Albuquerque Public Schools with dramatic, demonstrable results. Her team of enthusiastic teachers is inspiring teachers in other cities to include SignWriting in their classrooms.



SignWriting in Albuquerque, New Mexico

Dr. Cecilia Flood wrote her dissertation, in 2002, on the benefits of SignWriting in deaf education.

Similarly, throughout Germany, teacher Stefan Woehrmann is revolutionizing the education of deaf students, not only in elementary grades but also at the university level. In Spain, a novel written in Spanish Sign Language (Madrid dialect), written in SignWriting without spoken language, has recently been published, thanks to the efforts of Steve and Dianne Parkhurst. Reports come in of groups translating the Bible into various signed languages, following the lead of Reverend Ron Dettloff, The Deaf Church, St. Clair Shores, Michigan. In Norway, Dr. Ingvild Roald; in Switzerland, Dr. Penny Boyes Braem; and in Malta, Dr. Marie Alexander continue their independent research programs using SignWriting.

Dictionaries that include SignWriting are being produced around the world.



SignWriting in Germany. These deaf children are writing MundbildSchrift, a technique that uses standardized SignWriting facial expressions to show the mouth positions of German speech.

In 2001, Brazil lead the way with the publishing of the thick two-volume encyclopedia, *The Brazilian Sign Language Encyclopedic Dictionary*.



This prodigious, illustrated work is now being re-published as a series of 25 smaller dictionaries, under the direction of Dr. Fernando Capovilla at the University of San Paulo. Also in Brazil, the quatro-lingual *Brazilian Sign Language Pocket Dictionary* written by Charles Butler in

collaboration with Deaf teacher Marianne Stumpf, the first Deaf teacher to teach SignWriting in Brazil, is being prepared for publication.



Brazilian Deaf teacher Marianne Stumpf.

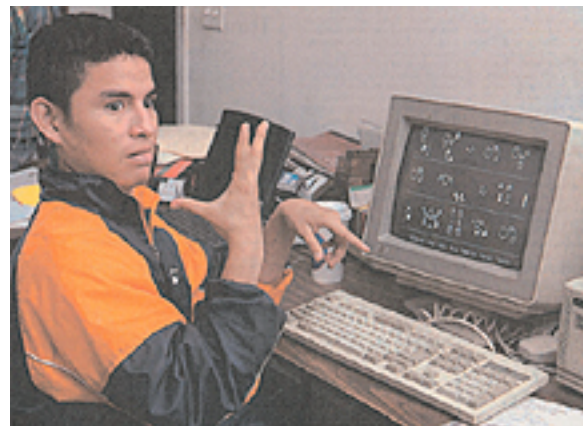
Brazilian professor of computer science, Dr. Antonio Carlos da Rocha Costa, has developed SWML at the Universidade Catolica de Pelotas. SWML is the *SignWriting Markup Language* which converts SignWriting documents into web-based usable type, an important development that will bring SignWriting into modern computer programs. In Nicaragua, amazingly, SignWriting, under the tutelage of Judy and James Shepard-Kegl, has brought a way to read and write the newly-evolving language of isolated deaf Nicaraguan children, many who had no prior language at all!

How did SignWriting get started? It is the conception of one person who had a vision and persevered. When Valerie Sutton went to Denmark to teach the Royal Danish Ballet Company to read and write dance in the early 1970's, she had no inkling that Sutton DanceWriting could be developed into a way of writing sign languages. An invitation to help with a sign project at the University of Copenhagen introduced her to the "beautiful world of the Deaf" as she described it, when writing home to her parents in the USA.

At first, like most of us who hear, it was hard to understand why some deaf people couldn't read. They could see, couldn't they? Yes. But hearing people see and yet cannot read foreign languages automatically, just because they see them on the

page. Seeing isn't enough. It helps to know a language in order to read it. And in the case of spoken languages that use the Roman alphabet, such as English or Danish, it is necessary to be able to hear those languages, to be able to sound out the letters in each word when learning to read. A born-deaf child is deprived of hearing the language, and also deprived of knowing the language. They are asked to read their second language, the spoken language of their country, before learning to read and write their first language, Sign Language.

Valerie realized that SignWriting's visual, recognizable depictions might be the clue to a written form for sign languages, and that a written form for sign languages might in turn be a clue to bringing the world of written literature to those who use sign language as their primary language. Could SignWriting be the answer to the centuries-long lack of written communication for sign language users? That SignWriting could offer this wondrous possibility made it a magnificent risk--one worth taking!



Above: Barney, from Nicaragua, shown here at the **University of Southern Maine** teaching the SignWriter Computer Program, is a Deaf person who truly benefited from SignWriting. He writes to his Deaf aunt in SignWriting. Since they do not know English or Spanish, SignWriting gives them a way to communicate with each other.

So Valerie returned to America to teach her invention, Sutton DanceWriting at the Boston Conservatory of Music's dance department in 1976. Sutton DanceWriting was a requirement for graduation as a dance major at the Boston

Conservatory for ten years, from 1976 -1986. Sutton trained 83 qualified DanceWriting teachers in those important years.

In 1977, Valerie was invited by Dr. Judy Shepard-Kegl, to present Sutton SignWriting to linguists of the New England Sign Language Society (NESLS), at a workshop at MIT. That same year, Sutton presented SignWriting at a research conference of linguists and Sign Language teachers, the NSSLRT in Chicago. At that conference she shared the podium with renowned linguist Dr. William Stokoe. The two presenters compared their two notation systems in front of a group of fascinated researchers. Later that summer, Valerie traveled to Connecticut to teach SignWriting to the National Theatre of the Deaf, working with famous Deaf actors, among them Linda Bove of the Sesame Street children's TV program, and Bernard Bragg, of Gallaudet University, who has performed in Deaf theatres around the world. In 1979, Sutton left DanceWriting in the capable hands of her students at the Conservatory, and traveled to Rochester, New York, to work as a consultant at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), in the Communications Research Department. Under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise, this 6-month residence at NTID resulted in a series of Technical Signs Books using SignWriting. To this day the series continues to be published by NTID.

In 1980, Valerie returned home to California to spend full time developing SignWriting through a unique project: **The SignWriter Newspaper**. For the first time in history, a newspaper was written in Sign Language. This revolutionary idea shook the sign language establishment, which believed that there was no way to write sign language, and had accepted the lack of a written form as their reality. Who was this woman choosing to write our language, people asked? But no matter how controversial, Sutton persisted by hiring ten part-time native signing born-deaf people to write the articles in their native Sign Language. This proved that it was a true written language, because Deaf people who had trouble learning to read and write English or spoken language, could write their own language with ease. To this day, there are Deaf educators who tell their classrooms about an historic era, when they received a free newspaper four times a

year, written in Sign Language - a language they had assumed could never be written.



BEFORE COMPUTERS:
Writing the newspaper by hand.

With few funds, no institutional connection, but with deep conviction that this was to be her life's work, Valerie distributed the SignWriter Newspaper to 11,000 Deaf Community educators and researchers quarterly, from 1981-1984. Each issue was written by hand with ink pens because this was the era before the personal computer. Some issues had articles written in four languages: American Sign Language, Danish Sign Language, English and Danish. The publishing of the SignWriter Newspaper led to the acceptance of testing SignWriting in the Danish school system, from 1982-1988.

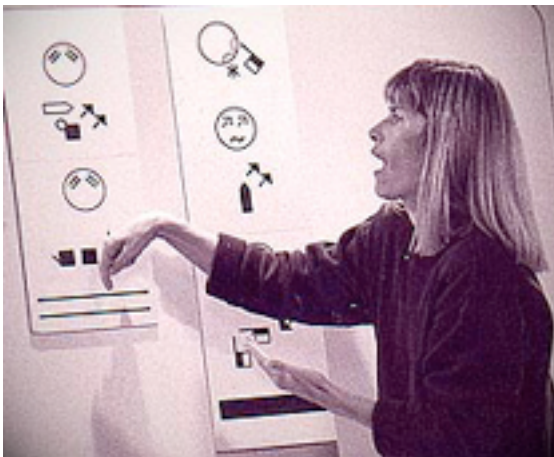
In 1986, Dr. Karen van Hoek, the resident linguist of the DAC, introduced a young, brilliant computer programmer, Richard Gleaves, to SignWriting. Richard's groundbreaking software design on the Apple //e and c, and later in MS-DOS, became the renowned SignWriter Computer Program, the world's first Sign Language processor. Like a word processor, the signs are typed quickly.

SignWriter 4.4 is in use today in 27 countries and serves thousands of people.



Teacher Stefan Woehrmann teaches the SignWriter Computer Program to students in Germany.

In 1988, Deaf Community leader Lucinda O'Grady Batch, contacted Valerie and together, they established the Deaf Action Committee For SignWriting (the DAC). The purpose was to hone an approach compatible with the Deaf point of view. The language knowledge of the experts in the DAC, and Valerie's generous spirit and open-mindedness to their suggestions, plus her skill in inventing the symbols necessary to write their spatial language, had a positive influence on the evolution of SignWriting writing styles around the world.



Lucinda O'Grady Batch teaching SignWriting in 1995 on the Lessons in SignWriting Video Series.

It is likely that there are as many sign languages as spoken languages in the world. SignWriting writes them all, on paper or on computer. Just as the Roman alphabet is the basis for writing many spoken languages, SignWriting is the basis for writing the world's many signed languages, an historic first.

The reason SignWriting writes all signed languages is that it is not language based, but movement based. It simply records what is seen. Movements of fingers, hands and arms and facial expressions are observed and written down. But the meaning of the movements rests on the users. When Valerie assisted the sign project at the University of Copenhagen, she did not know Danish Sign Language, but she could write it accurately. She wrote what she saw.

It is sometimes confusing to understand the difference between laboratory notation systems and a writing system such as SignWriting. SignWriting is a welcomed adjunct in research work, used in academic projects, including numerous theses in universities. But it also has a global dimension. It is practical for everyday use, for everyday people. It gives the Deaf population, their families and teachers a way to read, write and type sign language. It provides the needed architecture, the means for Deaf cultural leaders to at last give the hearing world the gift of their beautiful languages. SignWriting was designed to be used by Deaf people themselves, to give them voice and recognition, and a chance to enter the modern world as true participants. Improving Deaf literacy is empowering a long-ignored section of society.

Valerie's mastery of computers has turned out to be key to the success of her invention. Gifted computer programmers have come forward to make significant contributions. Thanks to the Olympian talents of Richard Gleaves, the SignWriter Computer Program came into use in the years 1986-1996. To this day it is used enthusiastically by deaf children in their schools. SignWriter is free for download on the world wide web, and is the world standard for typing SignWriting.



Hello! ;-)

Valerie Sutton, 1995

In 2002, the three-year project SignBank was completed. Now in 2003, it offers access to the **SignWriting Online Dictionary**, specially designed as a FileMaker database. This is a joint effort of Valerie Sutton, who created the design, and FileMaker expert Todd Duell whose special skill provided the programming. SignBank 2002 is a milestone, making SignWriting more accessible for sign language users. In the map by Bill Reese below, the red dots show the 27 countries using SignWriting and SignBank CD-Roms.



Valerie also established the SignWriting Literacy Project in 1998, which continues in 2003. She creates her own books, writes them, prints them and binds them herself. She then gives them free to classes for the deaf, if the teachers request them. Her award-winning web sites, with over 1000 web pages, offers instruction and downloadable materials, many without cost.

No one has ever worked more selflessly than Valerie Sutton. Despite a severe immune disorder, she reaches out from her hillside home office via web and email to establish written sign languages.

She moderates a spirited SignWriting Email List online. She has the help and admiration of brilliant people in the deaf & hearing worlds, researchers, educators and computer programmers.



June 1998. Left: Deaf SignWriting teacher and author Darline Clark Gunsauls. Center: Brazilian linguist, Dr. Ronice Müller de Quadros, who used SignWriting in her dissertation, and Valerie Sutton, inventor SignWriting.

Over the span of twenty-nine years, modest support for the Center For Sutton Movement Writing, a 501c3 educational charity, has come from family and friends, companies and foundations, local, national and international. Under Valerie Sutton's direction, her non-profit organization demonstrates that even small donations can bring very large blessing. She has no paid staff, work space is donated, and funding goes directly to the SignWriting Literacy Project, rather than to administrative costs.

Specific funds are needed now to present a trial literacy program, with free teaching materials, to USA residential schools for the Deaf. In this era, when we promote the slogan that "no child be left behind", the deaf child must also be invited into literacy. Deaf children need no longer wait, because in the 21st century, SignWriting is a verified means of offering the signing deaf a way to read, write, and enjoy written language.

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