

By MAYET C. CULIBAO  
Special to Today

AT Any given school day, one will find the strapping Ryan Bernardo tinkering with a computer in the spanking new multimedia lab at the De La Salle University-College of Saint Benilde in Manila. He tirelessly practices his skills in video editing, web page design and programming in preparation for the next big phase in his young life—work. In fact, he has started knocking on doors of possible employers months before his graduation in July. Although he has yet to receive a reply, he remains confident of his skills and talent. Ryan, 21, fervently wishes that his competence in visual design and computer savvy would speak for themselves and that the companies he is applying for would overlook his work inexperience and one other important thing: that he cannot hear or speak. With the help of an interpreter, the young man told this writer in January that he often wonders how a personnel manager, who sees his potential on paper, would react if he or she finds out during the interview that he is deaf. Deaf friends who graduated ahead of him have told him stories of stinging rejection, of seeking employment and not finding any or worse, being shut out. He fears that this will be his lot, too.

**SILENCED AND ISOLATED**  
RYAN became deaf when he was six years old. He recalls that he had high fever, convulsion, then there was silence. Certain sounds are still audible to him, but he can't help but feel isolated from his parents and three younger sisters who all can hear. "I was very inquisitive when I was a child and I always wanted to share my thoughts and feelings, but when I became deaf things became different," he said in sign language. "Even if I want to ask questions, my family can't understand me." He confessed that he felt really hurt, "like I lost a big part of my life," when his hearing was impaired. "I was never happy. I was always sad because I couldn't communicate with anyone," he signed. Because of his intense desire to connect with other people, he sometimes wishes that "he can leave his deaf body and transfer to the body of a hearing person."

Ryan found shelter, though, in the De La Salle University-College of Saint Benilde School of Deaf Education and Applied Studies (SDEAS), where he is about to wrap up the requirements for his course in Bachelor in Applied Deaf Studies. He spends most of his waking hours in school with his fellow deaf friends and solicitous teachers, "who look for other ways to understand me." It is also in school where he discovered his passion for the fusion of visuals and computer programming, which helped him win the first prize in the school's web page design contest last year.

**COLLEGE FOR THE DEAF**

RYAN belongs to the 15-member SDEAS class 2003, the biggest batch in the school's 12-year history. Under the umbrella of the De La Salle system, SDEAS (then School of Special Studies) has been offering alternative educational opportunities for deaf high-school graduates since 1991. (The deaf community capitalizes on the initial letter of this word as a mark of its own cultural and linguistic identity.) At that time, there were elementary and secondary schools for the deaf but hardly any opportunities for vocational training or tertiary-level education. And up to now, no big tertiary institution has taken any bold step to open its doors to deaf students other than the De La Salle University-College of Saint Benilde, said SDEAS dean Techna Behit de la Torre. The school initially offered a two-year certificate course in accounting and bookkeeping. There was a need, however, to further expand the training opportunities of the deaf that would transform them into highly competitive graduates who can both serve as advocates to society and, at the same time, be productive professionals in various fields, de la Torre explained. So, in 1996, SDEAS introduced the Bachelor in Applied Deaf Studies, a program that facilitates the reorientation of deaf students toward greater understanding of their cultural identity and their natural language while equipping them additional skills in particular fields of specialization, such as multimedia arts and entrepreneurship.

Most of the graduates of the certificate course eventually enrolled in the degree program. So far, the degree has produced eight college alumni since the year 2000. All these years, however, one pressing concern has remained constant: Finding employment for the graduates.

**THE QUEST FOR EMPLOYMENT**

AT the national scale, college graduates are already having difficulty in finding employment, what more our deaf graduates? de la Torre said. She mentioned that society's limited awareness of the deaf sector is another debilitating factor. Even if deaf graduates have the skills and the competency, the hearing people's lack of awareness and understanding on how to work and communicate effectively with them prevents their integration in a hearing-populated work environment. "Sadly, the deaf are often evaluated not on their merits, but on the potential 'disturbance' that they may create in the communication flow and work processes in a hearing environment," she said.

Some of SDEAS previous graduates found contractual work, while the school absorbed four of them. "We hired them because they were excellent graduates. We were convinced of their capabilities and potentials and saw that they can contribute to the overall effectiveness of our department. This decision is the first step in our seriousness to educate the decision-makers in industry to follow suit," she said.

**>>> FAMILY**

# THE FUTURE OF DEAF GRADUATES



But the school cannot continue to be the sole patron of its products. "We need to all this idea, to help the employers recognize the benefits they will get out of hiring the deaf," she said. For starters, the school is gearing up its graduating students for practicality in needed companies. Prior to that, the school will develop a work plan, with the employer and the assigned supervisors so that they can address both the needs of the company and SDEAS students.

**PARTNERSHIP WITH PEN-INTERNATIONAL**

DE LA TORRE admits that this is "uncharted waters" for the school, since this is the first time in SDEAS' 12-year history that it is embarking on a massive effort to educate potential employers. Furthermore, the school does not have any local models to follow. Right now, SDEAS is banking on the support of its newly forged partnership with the Postsecondary Education Network, or PEN-International, based in the National Technical Institute of the Deaf of the Rochester Institute of Technology (NTID-RIT) in New York.

Funded by the Nippon Foundation of Japan, PEN-International is an association of schools and universities, mostly in Asia-Pacific and Southeast Asia, that are serving people who are deaf. It assists its partners by introducing various advancements in tertiary education, such as innovative work technology, faculty training and development, information technology, instructional technology, telecommunications technology, as well as curriculum and instructional development.

"We work with programs that have demonstrated progress," James DeCaro, the network's director, told this writer during the launching of the PEN-International Multimedia Learning Center at the DLSU-College of Saint Benilde early this year. "We want to help them become stronger for them to become a hub of learning in their home country, to reach out to other institutions and to increase opportunities for postsecondary education for people who are deaf."

Besides the technical and training aid, the network will walk SDEAS through the process of linking up with employers. DeCaro, a civil engineer who served as NTID's dean for 14 years, underscored the importance of building partnerships with employers. "You are going to prepare deaf people to work in the workplace, and the best way to prepare them is to work with employers," he said. "We can work with SDEAS about the nature of employment in the Philippines, what kind of employers there are

and how to find ways to constructively and collaboratively work with them."

He revealed that the NTID has a 50-year track record of working with employers and educating employers in the United States on the capabilities of his people who are deaf. "I think we have a way for us to have an impact on the perception and attitude of employers on what deaf people can do," he continued. "You can educate the students with the skills, but the employers may not be aware of what they can do. Employers may look at a deaf person and say, 'Oh, I think he can't do this job because he is deaf.' And the answer is, 'No that is not correct. They can do that job very well and here are the reasons why.'"

**LINKING UP WITH EMPLOYERS**

AS a concrete example, DeCaro cited how the first deaf civil engineering graduate of NTID was employed in the New York State Transportation Department. "They never had a deaf engineer before, so at first they were very nervous about having a deaf engineer out in the workplace because they say he's going to be hurt or injured," he said. "My thinking was I don't think so because out in the workplace, you feel the vibrations in the construction site just like the deaf do."

The Transportation Department gave the deaf engineer a chance on the condition that he will wear a white helmet to distinguish him from the hearing engineers. A week later, DeCaro found out that the deaf engineer was already wearing the same yellow helmet just like everybody else. It turned out that most of the other engineers also relied on vibrations for they couldn't hear anything either because of so much noise in the construction site. In addition, because of his deafness, the engineer also became more cautious.

"A lot of times we make assumptions on what we know but mostly on the basis of what we don't know," he explained. "We see somebody who is different, we see somebody who is deaf and we make assumptions that they can't do this and they can't do that. And yet we are making those assumptions not on the basis of knowledge but on what we think it must be like to be deaf. But we don't know. We have no idea what it's like to be deaf because we are not." Over the years, the NTID has built relationships with companies in the States such as Eastman-Kodak, Citibank, the federal government, engineering firms and advertising agencies. "Every place where hearing people get hired or succeed, the deaf people get hired and succeed, too," he said. Success depends on the skills and desire of

the individual regardless of his hearing capability.

**BOOSTING ENTREPRENEURSHIP**  
IN the Philippines, however, some advocates believe that entrepreneurship, not wage employment, is the answer to the deaf's unemployment problem. According to Richard Arsenio, the national representative for persons with disabilities or PWDs, in the National Antipoverty Commission, "We need to shift the minds of the PWDs from wage employment to entrepreneurship."

He acknowledged that there are some efforts to employ the deaf, but most of them do not go down to the grassroots who constitute the majority of the sector. Even the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (Republic Act 7277) does not guarantee employment for PWDs. "It is composed of motherhood statements with no clear provisions for implementation," he said. "Its emphasis is on wage employment but the reality is that because of the financial crisis in the world, companies are either folding up or downsizing, so how can they take in additional workers?"

During the launching of the PEN-International Multimedia Learning Center in January, Arsenio affirmed the significance of the SDEAS-PEN-International partnership for its response to the deaf's twin concerns: education and employment. "If you address these two, you'll address the other concerns," he said. He agreed that the program will give deaf college graduates a better foothold in the job market, but he hastened to add that the majority of the deaf and the PWDs in general are not educated. According to Arsenio, there is no way of knowing the exact number of deaf people of PWDs in the country because there is no national registration for them but estimates the population of PWDs at around 3 million. Out of this estimated number, only 2 percent go to school, only 1 percent are employed in contractual or short-term jobs and 82 percent are in the rural areas. The wheelchair-bound educator and PWD advocate is currently pushing for the passage of an economic independence bill for PWDs in Congress; it seeks government assistance for PWD-run businesses in marketing, technical upgrading and capitalization.

Likewise, he is working for the release of a presidential order that would mandate a responsive technical skills and capacity-building program for PWDs, especially for the grassroots, and instruct government agencies to support the products and services of PWDs. Such government-PWD partnership already exists in Calcutan City, where a group of deaf workers produce chairs and desks and supplies them to a few public schools. The group is affiliated with the cooperative PWDs that Arsenio manages. The cooperative is engaged in metal fabrication, furniture, bag making, garments and web page design, currently employs 600 people with disabilities in 12 work centers nationwide.

Arsenio noted that the five deaf workers in their factory are more productive and earn more than the other PWDs. "The deaf have a distinct edge over other PWDs because they have the mobility, they have complete fingers, arms and legs and they can read. In truth, deaf workers earn double the income of the other workers who are blind or physically disabled," he said.

He believes that the deaf can go after a better and organize themselves into a subcontracting firm that offers services such as technical, electrical installation, photocopying, repair data encoding or proofreading. "There are limitless possibilities for the deaf if only the majority will concentrate on their skills and not their disability," he ended. Ryan and all the other deaf youth brimming with enthusiasm and talent can only hope that employers and society in general will hear and understand this simple message.



**CHARMAGNE CHANTAL ADONIS** is the youngest daughter of Bob and Charmagne Adonis. Bobbie (her nickname) will celebrate her first birthday today, Easter Sunday, at Discovery Suites. A very cute, happy baby, Bobbie is always smiling and giggling. She loves to dance along with her elder sister, Babalee, and to watch her baby song videos and to listen to Mozart.

**FREE FREE FREE!**  
Too is giving out free space for baby pictures and announcements for baptisms, deaths, weddings and family reunions. Send them before our 5 pm Thursday deadline. We email mail to Family Page, Today, 55 Pasco de Roxas, Makati City, or e-mail to vjcc@dnormail.com.