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American Sign Language club starts up at Chippewa Valley School

Junior leading the club plans to teach beyond the alphabet, host speakers



Chippewa Valley High School was scheduled to hold its first meeting of the American Sign Language club on Feb. 16. (THE MACOMB DAILY FILE PHOTO)

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At Chippewa Valley High School the world language class selections include Spanish, French and German, but a new club is now expanding language offerings in a whole different direction: American Sign Language.

The club was the brainchild of junior Ashlea Kittle, a 16-year old student with one deaf parent and another hard of hearing. She has been speaking American Sign Language all her life.

“I feel like the more people that know sign language the better,” Kittle said.

Kittle moved from North Carolina to Michigan about a year ago, but just set the wheels in motion to begin the American Sign Language club a few weeks ago. Her goal is to spread her knowledge of American Sign Language, as well as the Deaf culture and community, among her classmates.

“I mentioned it to my science teacher in casual conversation and she was like, ‘Start it. Look into it,’” Kittle said.

She began by emailing a clubs director and stopping by the counseling office.

“I figured it would not hurt to ask. I was directed to the principal and then to the club advisor,” Kittle said. “I sent an email asking how difficult it would be to start and have a club. She said it was not difficult. I had to fill out the paperwork and find an advisor, a teacher to agree.”

Kittle asked teacher Melanie Slank to serve as the advisor, and she agreed.

“Ashlea is very passionate about Deaf culture and sign language, and I wanted to support her in starting the club,” Slank said. “I am also interested in learning about Deaf culture and sign language.”

The club is open to any Chippewa Valley High School student. Slank said students can join the club using Remind, and there are no costs to join. In forming the club, Kittle also needed to develop ideas for how she would conduct the club and attract interest.

“It is going to be, it is a club, but more of a class sort of thing. Like with any new language, you have to apply yourself and practice, learn and memorize,” Kittle said.

The Chippewa Valley High School American Sign Language club was scheduled to hold its first meeting at the Clinton Township school on Feb. 16 for an hour after school. Kittle plans to have the club meet regularly on the first and third Thursday of each month. There have been rumblings of interest among her classmates, including one friend who has been trying to learn American Sign Language for several years.

“The first class will be more of the basics,” Kittle said.

Kittle plans to begin by teaching not only the American Sign Language alphabet, but also basic phrases such as “nice to meet you,” “How are you,” “help,” and “emergency.” Slank said students in the club will also be able to utilize apps with daily practice options.

Kittle said through the club, she will teach those with hearing how to “put themselves in a deaf person’s shoes” as well as the history and culture of the Deaf. Members will additionally learn to study facial expressions, and eventually hold entire conversations in American Sign Language. To this end, she hopes to eventually have the club visit a restaurant and communicate exclusively in American Sign Language. She is also planning to host guest speakers, such as college professors.

“I am looking to maybe call colleges and see if anyone is teaching an American Sign Language class,” Kittle said.