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Goodyear executive leaves a legacy of empowerment for deaf residents



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MICHAEL CHANSLEY

Sherri Collins accepting an award for her advocacy work.

Posted Tuesday, August 29, 2023 12:10 pm

By Michael McDaniel (/stories/michael-mcdaniel,374826)

Mail (mailto:mmcdaniel@iniusa.org)

Goodyear resident Sherri Collins got to where she was by being a relentless advocate for the deaf and hard of hearing.

Her work will undoubtedly change how deaf and hard-of-hearing people approach a world that thinks they can't succeed.

When she applied for graduate school at North Carolina State University, she was initially denied entry by a dean who doubted her abilities because of her hearing impairment.

“The dean told me that they had never had a deaf person in a graduate program in his department and that it would be too difficult for me. He told me he didn’t want to see me fail,” she said. “I looked right at him and said, ‘Dean, you just said that to the wrong deaf woman. I have the right to try, and I have the right to fail just like anyone else in the graduate program.’”

Collins worked full-time and attended grad school while the university provided her with highly skilled professional interpreters. At graduation, the dean who doubted her apologized for not thinking she was capable.

“He asked if I knew any other deaf people who might want to apply to graduate school,” she said.

She has been engaged in facilitating opportunities for deaf people since that day. With any hope the world of the deaf and hard of hearing being incapable will be silenced.

Name: Sherri Collins

Occupation: Executive director, Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing

Hometown: Goodyear

Family: Randy (husband)

What advocacy achievements are you most proud of that have helped people?

- 2023: Launched the Age of Access initiative, a one-stop destination for resources, information, and programming for Arizona’s older adults who are deaf or experiencing hearing loss.
- 2020: Launched a statewide clear mask program, providing masks to deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals that read lips as a primary form of communication. Ensured that an ASL interpreter was available and accessible during all Governor’s COVID-19 news conferences.
- 2020 – launched the Let’s Get to Work initiative, the first-ever statewide employment initiative, working with Arizona’s business community to reduce the unemployment/underemployment that disproportionately affects the deaf and hard of hearing community.
- 2019 – Partnered with ASU’s Speech and Hearing Clinic to provide hearing care to those who qualify. The program has expanded to UA and will soon be available at NAU.
- 2018 – 2019 - Trained more than 2,000 sworn Phoenix and Gilbert Police officers.
- 2018 - Launched its Support Service Provider program for individuals with combined vision and hearing loss.
- 2018 – Partnered with Phoenix Sky Harbor to add a Video Relay Service to assist Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Speech-Challenged Travelers.
- 2017 - helped Arizona become the first state to loop all three areas and only the second state in the nation to install hearing loops in both the House and Senate.
- 2012 – partnered with the Olive Osmond Hearing Fund, raising funds for children in need of hearing aids and other resources.
- 2011 – Helped with the design-build of the Apache ASL Trails apartment community to provide housing for persons who are deaf, deaf-blind or hard of hearing.

Do you feel like you’ve made a difference for people?

I oversee the development and implementation of the commission’s strategic goals and policies and develop programs to ensure our constituents are informed about available resources.

As the first and only deaf lobbyist registered in the nation, I have strengthened and implemented state policies affecting deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals and their relationship to the public, industry, health care and educational opportunities.

I am the commission’s first deaf director and currently the longest-tenured state director for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing.



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Along with my staff of 21, we contribute extensively to educating and raising awareness among the general public to better understand the barriers deaf and hard of hearing face in their daily lives.

Why did you get into deaf and hard-of-hearing advocacy?

Born deaf, I grew up in Bourbonnais, Illinois. Living in a small town with limited educational resources, my parents made the difficult decision to enroll me at Illinois School for the Deaf in Jacksonville, more than three hours away from home. At age 12, my world started opening up as I became involved in just about every activity at the school, especially the volleyball team. Surrounded by other deaf students, as well as teachers and administrators, I thrived. It was from this point on that I adopted the motto of “motivate to advocate” that continues to ring true today.

What is something many people don't know about you?

I was Miss Deaf Illinois in 1983

What's your favorite sport and team?

College football – University of Georgia. Go DAWGS!

At the end of the day, what brings you the most joy?

Spending time with my husband, talking about our day and simply enjoying our time together.

What advice would you give to people entering your field?

Listen, be a collaborator and be visible outside of the deaf/hard-of-hearing community.

How are you involved in the local community?

In addition to my work with ACDHH, I currently serve on the newly founded Board of Associates for the National Telecommunication For the Deaf (TDI). I am a past board president for the National Association of State Agencies of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and have served as a governing board member for the Sequoia School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. I have also been Secretary on the board at the Arizona Center for Disability Law; Phoenix College, Chair of the Interpreter Preparation Program Advisory board; President and Secretary for the Arizona State Schools for the Deaf and the Blind board; Chair Arizona Statewide Independent Living Council; the Region IV Board Representative on the National Association for the Deaf board; and a past member of the Federal Communications Commission's IP Telecommunication Relay Service Advisory board. I also serve on many national, state, and local committees and task forces.

What's your favorite local restaurant, and what would you recommend off the menu?

Oh my! I have several... Haymakers in Goodyear (Wrangler Cheeseburger) and Old Pueblo (shredded beef tacos or spinach enchiladas)

What's your favorite vacation spot?

Paris, France

What did you last binge-watch?

Suits

What did you want to be as a child?

Police officer

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