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City Arts Festival Interpreter Helps Deaf Hear Lyrics

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He could be mistaken for an overzealous fan or a rock 'n' roll groupie. Barry Nickelsberg is neither. Hired to interpret music for the deaf at the Festival of the Arts, Nickelsberg makes the most of his corner of the stage, moving, shaking and reaching those handicapped in silence as the band at hand — be it rock 'n' roll or a gospel choir — plays to the crowd. "I've done six shows now and I'm dead," says a perspiring Nickelsberg after interpreting music played by the group "Thrill" on Saturday afternoon.

A couple stops by to tell Nickelsberg he was more fun to watch than the band. A deaf youth then greets him with a smile and a lot of gratitude. They exchange

sign language and then the youth talks through Nickelsberg.

"I've never seen anything like it before," says Austin Hall, 15, of Oklahoma City who didn't intend to "listen" as long as he did, since he can't understand the lyrics or hear the music. "But I stayed for the whole thing."

Indeed, the Festival of the Arts has never had anyone like Nickelsberg.

The idea of inviting the Alexandria, Va., resident came about when Arts Council Director Jackie Jones spotted him performing in Washington, D.C., said Chris Bastain, festival spokeswoman.

Using an arts council grant, Nickelsberg was hired to teach Oklahomans his craft. The

council deliberately timed these workshops to coincide with the arts festival, Bastain said.

"Everyone I've talked to has been absolutely pleased with his work," Bastain said.

"The energy is incredible. He's just phenomenal."

Nickelsberg didn't know a deaf person when he decided to learn sign language in 1974.

Instead, he said it was a spiritual calling, something he felt compelled to do.

By 1981, he took his interpretations to the stage and soon received a compliment from Sammy Davis Jr.

Davis told him he discovered a new art form.

"Coming from him that was the best compliment I was ever giv-

en," Nickelsberg said. Although Nickelsberg calls himself shy, he says something about the stage sets him on fire.

"Something takes over on stage," Nickelsberg said.

"If God talks to you and says this is what I want you to do, you don't argue."

More than a performing and visual art, Nickelsberg says his act introduces the deaf culture to regular people.

Unlike a blind person, or a wheelchair-bound person, a deaf person is invisible, un-

til he starts "signing."

Having a regular crowd view his act raises awareness, Nickelsberg said. Plus, deaf people make excellent music fans.

"They can enjoy the music as much as we can. We've just proved that," Nickelsberg said.

"They realize they don't have to be left out."

Nickelsberg performs some 80 shows a year across the country.

He says so far there are about 11 other sign language artists interpreting music.

That is changing with every workshop he gives.

He warns communities that once the deaf culture experiences his act, they may demand it continuously.

He saw that happen in Washington, D.C., recently, and performances had to hire newly trained sign language artists.

Aside from his altruism and inspiration, Nickelsberg has a pragmatic reason for opening the deaf to music.

"It helps me sleep well," Nickelsberg said.