



American Sign Language class at CALA



Haley Jensen



Shelley Thomas (r) in sign language class

HONORS HOSTS MTSU'S FIRST AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

By *Tayla Courage*, a junior majoring in Journalism

An American Sign Language (ASL) class, the first ever offered on the MTSU campus, took place last fall in the Martin Honors Building. Shelley Thomas, a professor in the Department of World Languages, Literatures and Cultures, offered the class through the Center for Accelerated Language Acquisition (CALA), where she is founder and director.

Thomas was contacted last fall by Eric Workman, vice president and director of interpreting services at Bridges for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Nashville, about adding ASL to the language teaching institute at MTSU. Workman said that there is strong interest and that the courses would encourage an understanding of the language of the deaf community.

Additionally, Haley Jensen, owner of private ASL company Voice Off, had reached out to Thomas about learning CALA teaching methods. Following Jensen's summer internship with Thomas in 2018, CALA hired her to teach its first ASL class in the fall semester. As Workman predicted, people were eager to sign up, and the class filled in two days. CALA had to close registration with a 40-person waiting list.

Describing the CALA curriculum, Jensen says that students learn the alphabet, numbers, body parts, clothes, colors, places in the house, feelings, and greetings, along with several other "high-frequency" words and phrases that allow students to express personal information in order to engage in basic

communication. ASL also forces learners to become more aware of facial expressions and emotions because of the lack of vocal inflection that the hearing person would normally rely upon. "You can do the exact same signs, but your face tells you whether it is a statement, a question, or exclamation," Jensen said.

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After the great success of the first ASL class, the ASL course has been offered again this spring. Student feedback mentioned the "passionate, knowledgeable instructor," a "fun, safe environment," the "engaging, humorous games" that help them "retain the information," the "interaction with other students," and "useful and practical" content. One student responded, "Great lesson! Loved the hangman game and chocolate. This is definitely the most fun way to learn a language."

The class cost is about \$20 per hour and is offered in two seven-week sessions. All classes are open to the community, and discounts are available for MTSU students, faculty, and staff.