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# LOCAL



## Course completion a sign of accomplishment

**Heather Hamilton honed her sign language skills at the VRS Interpreting Institute in Utah.**

**By Crissa Shoemaker DeBree**  
Staff writer

Heather Hamilton didn't understand why the young boy wouldn't acknowledge her goodbyes. The two 5-year-olds had spent an entire afternoon playing together. He didn't say much, but Heather thought he was just quiet. Then, it



*Art Gentile / staff photographer* Heather Hamilton of Horsham, is only one of 12 American Sign Language interpreter graduate students chosen from across the nation to attend a prestigious, post-graduation program in Salt Lake City .

dawned on her: He wasn't answering her farewells, no matter how loudly she shouted, not because he was ignoring her. He simply couldn't hear her. He was deaf. "He was gesturing (in sign language) and I didn't even know it," she said. Hamilton, now 22, never saw the boy again. She doesn't even remember his name. But that encounter had a profound effect on her. Today, the Hatboro-Horsham High School and Bloomsburg University graduate is an American Sign Language interpreter. She recently completed an intensive, three-month course at the VRS Interpreting Institute in Salt Lake City. Only two dozen top-level Interpreter Education Program graduates are chosen each year for VRS' School-to-Work program. "Our program is intended for people who already have a foundation," said faculty member Michelle Draper. "We try to hit those people who have enough skills but could use our support and benefit from that. Our goal is to improve their skills and their confidence. The end goal is full, sustainable employment for them." Draper said Hamilton proved to be a natural leader whose skills and confidence grew as she went through the program. "It was amazing," Hamilton said. "I worked

very hard, very long over the 14 weeks I was there. But I can't say enough positive things about it." Hamilton said she's known ever since her childhood meeting that she wanted to be a sign language interpreter. She graduated from Bloomsburg's interpreting program in August. She has a provisional certificate from the state that allows her to interpret for business, education and non-emergency medical clients. She's applied for her full certification, which will allow her to interpret in courts and in emergency situations. She's applied to Galludet University in Washington, D.C., a leader in liberal education and career development for deaf and hearing-impaired students. If accepted, Hamilton hopes to study the linguistics of American Sign Language. When she interprets, Hamilton thinks back to her childhood playmate. "I, as a 5-year-old kid, didn't care that he was deaf," Hamilton said. "We played anyway. I want adults to communicate with deaf people and not feel any barriers at all."

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