

**Date: May 27, 2015**

## **VRSII Faculty Teaches and Studies in Austria**

**SALT LAKE CITY** – During March, the faculty of the VRS Interpreting Institute (VRSII), the University of North Florida (UNF) and master's students currently registered in the VRSII/UNF joint master's of ASL/English Interpreting Pedagogy program, traveled to Linz, Austria. There, they studied and taught with faculty and students at GESDO, a training institute much like the VRSII. Faculty and students personally paid for the trip and, during their visit, exchanged teaching and curriculum ideas using international and Austrian sign language.

"The ability to share resources and work together is an amazing opportunity," says Dr. Carolyn Ball, executive director of the VRSII. "Regardless of the language we use, we all utilize the same teaching processes and, in many cases, share the same successes and frustrations, like interpreter shortages and training shortages."

Faculty members Joseph Featherstone, Teddi von Pingel and Holly Nelson taught classes in classifiers, gender-appropriate interpreting and working with interpreting teams. Featherstone was struck by the similarities between Austrian and American Deaf cultures. He studied international sign language for three months prior to leaving for Austria. "I felt I learned as much as they did," Featherstone said. "A country's history says a lot, but it's the people who make the country." von Pingel said the challenge she faced was finding common ground between cultures in order to make her teaching material relatable to both American and Austrian students. She wanted to avoid using references that were familiar to her, but not to her students. Her solution was to use characters from the *Harry Potter* book series because people throughout the world are familiar with this story. "I told the class, 'Imagine Harry Potter is interpreting for Dumbledore.' The students could immediately see the challenge with this scenario because they were familiar with these two characters' personalities," von Pingel said. Nelson's class focused on collaboration and support within interpreting teams. Interpreters travelled from as far away as Vienna and southern Austria to attend. Nelson said for her, the most impactful aspect of the trip was seeing the consequences of the holocaust for deaf Austrian people and the resulting isolation of the Deaf community. "Because deaf people were so isolated after the holocaust, within an area approximately the size of Utah, there are four or five different sign languages – none of which are similar," she said.

Another memorable experience for faculty and students was a visit to a community called Lebonswetz-Schechenfelden, founded by neurologist, psychologist and artist Josef Felinger. The community is dedicated to deaf people with multiple disabilities. Ball said everyone in this community is given the opportunity to be valuable by creating artistic products that are sold in nearby Linz. The money is given to the Austrian government, which funds the community. VRSII faculty says this visit was a life-changing experience, and one they hope to repeat in the future.

For more in-depth information about the trip, read the VRSII's *Connector* newsletter at [www.vrsii.com/news](http://www.vrsii.com/news)

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