



Special Issue

VRSII Faculty Teaches and Studies in Austria

From March 10 through 26, VRS Interpreting Institute (VRSII) faculty joined the University of North Florida (UNF) Travel Abroad program to visit



Dr. Carolyn Ball
VRSII executive director

Linz, Austria, to work with faculty members and students at GESDO (<http://www.gesdo.at>), a training institute much like the VRSII. GESDO, founded approximately 20 years ago, offers a three-year program to train sign language interpreters. The organization is funded by the Austrian government, and only accepts new cohorts at the conclusion of each three-year training period. The cohorts are small – usually 12 students, and students must pass an entry and exit exam and be able to effectively interpret before they can graduate.

UNF master's students received a partial scholarship from UNF to help fund their trip. All other participants paid expenses out of pocket.

Door to GESDO Institute



Len Robertson and Teddi von Pingel

In addition to VRSII faculty, Dr. Sherry Shaw and Dr. Len Robertson of UNF, three UNF/VRSII master's program students and UNF

undergraduate students participated in the trip. VRSII faculty member, Joseph Featherstone, taught



Joseph Featherstone
VRSII faculty member

an (ASL) classifier class at GESDO. Featherstone knew he would be teaching deaf people, but wasn't sure whom, so for three months prior to the trip, he communicated with friends at Gallaudet to learn universal sign language and created a PowerPoint presentation using German for the headlines. Featherstone said he used a

variety of techniques, including software like "GoReact" to teach the GESDO interpreting educators a variety of effective teaching strategies that are successfully used at the VRSII. These strategies provided insight for GESDO faculty both in Austrian Sign language used in their Interpreter Education Program and in spoken German. Through the process, Joseph learned a lot of Austrian sign language himself. "I felt I learned as much as they did," Featherstone says. "I was very interested in learning their language and about

their culture. A country's history says a lot, but it's the people who make the country." When asked what about the trip surprised him, Featherstone said the similarities between the Austrian and American Deaf communities were surprising. Even though our languages are different, Featherstone said our cultural norms are very similar. He was also impressed by the history and age of the country compared to a relatively young America.



Featherstone teaching class

UNF/VRSII master's program students were given the opportunity to choose topics of interest and to teach those to GESDO students. Topics the master's students chose to teach were: medical interpreting; gender-appropriate interpreting; controlling environmental and other factors when interpreting; and theory of mind (interpreting influenced by the deaf person's perceived personality). The educators and students communicated through a combination of Austrian and universal sign language and English. An interpreter was available who was fluent in German, ASL and Austrian Sign Language. She provided interpreting when needed.

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Master's degree students

"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, frustrations, i.e. interpreter shortages and training shortages." Dr. Ball says while visiting Austria, their party was educated about the consequences of the genocide that took place during World War II that nearly wiped out the deaf population of Austria and mainland Europe. Ball says when the deaf community in Austria began to reappear, there was no single, standard sign language so each region of the country developed its own dialect. "Now," says Ball, "interpreters must have the ability to understand all the different dialects of Austrian Sign Language, and there are around nine or 10."



Teddi von Pingel, currently a student in the UNF/VRSII master's program and VRSII faculty member, said as she prepared to teach students who communicate in Austrian Sign Language, she had to drill down to the core of what she would be



Teddi von Pingel
VRSII faculty member

teaching, find commonalities between cultures and be careful not to use references in her teaching that were native to English.

In teaching a class about gender-appropriate interpreting, von Pingel chose in her teaching examples to use characters from the Harry Potter movies to demonstrate different interpreting situations, knowing that most people around the world are familiar with these characters. von Pingel told students, "Imagine that the interpreter is Harry Potter and the deaf person is Dumbledore." She said students immediately understood the challenges of interpreting in this hypothetical situation because they understood the characters' personalities.



von Pingel also stressed in her classes the importance of educators having personally experienced situations that they are teaching. For example, while on the trip, one of the master's students developed a kidney stone. He travelled

to a hospital, accompanied by an interpreter, to be examined. After a long discussion between the interpreter and the physician, which the student did not understand, the interpreter generalized what the doctor said and told the student, 'Don't worry about it,' forgetting to relay the specifics of the

actual diagnosis. The student felt that he had not received all the pertinent information he needed and stated that this must be how a deaf person feels when the interpreter does not accurately or completely interpret a conversation.

While on the trip, VRSII faculty had an inspiring visit to the facilities of Lebonswetz-Schechenfelden in Schechenfelden. This village is a community dedicated for deaf people with multiple disabilities, including cognitive, major physical disabilities and developmental disabilities. Ball says everyone in this community was given the opportunity to be valuable. Even those with the most severe disabilities, some who could only move their heads back and forth, were painting or engaged in other activities. The community provided facilities for pottery making, drawing, weaving, embroidery, candle making and more. Then the crafts were sold in nearby Lintz. The money



Lebonswetz-Schechenfelden workshop



raised from the sale of the art was given back to the government, which funds the community. Ball says without this community, many of the residents would have been isolated in institutions. She said everyone in the community had a job

they could do. Residents were taken on outings and the community was their home. "It was inspiring to see this community thriving, learning and being useful," says Ball.

The community's founder, Dr. Josef Felinger, is a neurologist, psychologist and artist whose father and uncles were also artists and were deaf. While visiting the community, Ball and other faculty members and students attended a worship service held in the community for the residents. Felinger had painted the biblical story of Noah for the service. He communicated the entire story through paintings and Austrian sign language. The congregation's input was incorporated into the paintings as the service proceeded. Felinger also illustrated hand shapes of the hymns so the congregation could follow along. Ball says it was obvious that this endeavor was more than just a



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Ball participates in telling the story of Noah and the Ark.

job to Felinger. The community provided to its deaf residents a family and a place to be. She says the first principle of the community was forgiveness. Everyone was acknowledged at their own learning level.

Felinger has also founded a clinic for the deaf in Linz and runs the clinic. Making the area even

more unique, many hearing residents of the neighboring community are all literate in sign language. To see more about the village, visit <http://www.barmherzige-brueder.at/site/lebenswelt/home>.

The other noteworthy part of the trip? According to faculty members, the gelato was fantastic and the bread in Austria is out of this world!

