

Good signs for honeybees

Collin student teaches one passion using another

HONEYBEES ARE DEAF. Somewhat insignificant to the general public, this fact carries more weight for the deaf children and adults with whom Collin College student and 2013 American Honey Queen Caroline Adams shared this story as she travelled the country.

“With kids, I’d tell them, ‘Bees use their bodies to communicate, just like you do,’” the American Sign Language major explained. “They automatically had this connection. They could relate, and beekeeping meant so much more to them.”

As the American Honey Queen, a role that made her spokesperson for the American Beekeeping Federation, Adams travelled to more than 21 states and spent about 175 days on the road. It was an adventure she says she never expected.

Although the American Honey Queen journey came as a surprise, Adams said the combination of two of her passions, beekeeping and American Sign Language, was natural.

“Beekeeping appeals to all of the senses,” Adams stressed, “and it impacts everyone on a daily basis.”

As Adams details, the pollination industry in the U.S. alone is worth \$19.2 billion annually. That doesn’t include honey. Honeybees pollinate more than 90 different food crops, almost a third of the average diet, and indirectly aid in the production of nuts, beef, chocolate, dairy and cotton. With the bee population trending downward, pollination decreases as well. Harvests shrink, resulting in higher demand than supply, and ultimately raising grocery store costs. Bees’ more well-known product, honey, is not only good for consumption purposes, but it is also used as a no side-effect health remedy and for skin and beauty use.

“Since it does affect us all, I wanted to open up beekeeping to everyone I could,” Adams said. “I really wanted to make more information available to the deaf community.”

While deaf individuals are privy to the same secondary knowledge as the general public, opportunities to learn from a



American Honey Queen Caroline Adams. © Nick Young / Collin College

beekeeper firsthand or have industry jargon explained to its full extent are less common.

“When this first became my goal, I realized we have this complex terminology in the industry, words we throw around,” Adams said. “Having to translate them to ASL, where there was no previously established word for our technical descriptions, helped me grasp that they aren’t common concepts.”

Adams had learned a few signs and concepts as a child, but her first formal ASL education came from professors at Collin College.

“Here at Collin, I went so much faster and farther with ASL than I ever thought I would,” Adams said. “The professors and lab technicians really invested in me.”

It was those same individuals who sat down with her and helped her interpret the beekeeping jargon. Together, they created new signs that let her communicate ideas correctly and completely.

Adams said as she travelled around the country, it was fascinating to learn different regional signs and add them to her repertoire, especially those associated with beekeeping.

Her overarching goals as American Honey Queen involved growing awareness about honeybee importance and decline and encouraging people to take steps toward bringing honeybees back. These steps could be as small as planting honeybee-friendly flowers the bees can gather food sources from, urban beekeeping, backyard beekeeping and purchasing local honey. However, her personal goal for the year was to present at Gallaudet, the nation’s most prestigious and well-known university for the deaf and hard of hearing.

“Gallaudet was my dream for this year,” Adams emphasized. Adams knew she would need a strong reputation to be

considered for presentation at Gallaudet. As part of her overall goal, she reached out to the deaf community nationally and explained her American Honey Queen role. In addition to community events and groups, she presented at a few schools, including the American School for the Deaf, the oldest residential school in the country. Following positive reception and education at those locations, Adams sent her information, recommendations and references to Gallaudet, where she was received warmly and with excitement.

Her presentation at the university was



given to an almost entirely deaf audience. Based in an ecology course, it included visitors as well.

Adams said attendees loved it. Although many had been exposed to basic concepts about honeybees and beekeeping before, it was interesting to see these students so interested in the environment and the current decline of honeybees.

“I was so excited with how intrigued they were,” Adams said. “They even asked if and how they could make beekeeping a ‘go-green’ project on their campus.”

Gallaudet was her dream, but Adams notes her favorite response to presentations came through working with children.

“Deaf kids will ask me if I’m deaf,” Adams laughed. “That’s the highest compliment I can get. It helps me know I must be doing something right.” **■**