You may have wondered about the terms “Deaf Culture” and “Deaf Community.” Rather than taking a medical approach, many individuals see themselves as part of a unique cultural and linguistic minority whose shared language, life experiences and education form a common bond.

**What is American Sign Language?**
Like spoken languages, sign languages vary by country and by region. There is no universal sign language. True American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete, grammatically complex language. It is not coded English, although some sign languages emulate English (Pidgin Signed English-PSE and Signed Exact English-SEE, are two examples). The distinction is significant; to many, English is a second language acquired later in life. Like other languages, ASL proficiency requires extensive instruction and a great deal of time. This may occur with ASL use at home, in school, and/or with other members of the Deaf Community.

People may be shocked to find out that most deaf children are raised in families that do not share a primary language. About 92 percent of DHH individuals are born to hearing families (Gallaudet University) and between 75 and 88 percent of those families do not sign. Naturally, this lack of a common language can have a life-long impact on the parent-child relationship, language acquisition and social adjustment. It can also deprive DHH youth of exposure to casual information from the dinner table, overheard conversations and colleague gossip which provides a foundation for later learning.

**Cultural Features**
Values, behaviors, and traditions of Deaf Culture include:

- Reliance on eyesight, including a visual language and lifestyle. “Deaf-friendly” architectural and interior designs often focus on lighting, open floor plans, and positioning of furniture that enhance sight lines.
- Supporting the use of sign language in educational settings (bilingual ASL/English programs)
- Social activities with other DHH individuals including athletic events, involvement in local organizations, and school reunions. The traditional Deaf Club culture is slowly receding due to newer technological alternatives.
- Various art forms - painting, drawing, theater, film, folklore, literature, storytelling, and poetry – are used to tell the story of Deaf Culture
- Communication norms focus on consistent eye contact and visual attention during conversations.
- Increasing use of technology to overcome communication barriers
- Visual strategies to gain a person’s attention include flicking a light switch, gentle tap on the shoulder, or waving at the person within the line of sight
- Deep connections within the Deaf Community. It is not uncommon for deaf youth to turn to a non-biological “deaf family” for guidance.

Within the Deaf Community, terms such as ‘hearing impaired,’ ‘deaf-mute’ and ‘deaf and dumb’ are offensive since they imply that the individual is “broken” or “inferior.” “Deaf or hard of hearing” is a widely accepted generic phrase.

**Who is Part of Deaf Culture?**
Identity is an individualized and personal process that evolves as one ages and experiences new situations. Not all individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing identify with Deaf Culture. Some individuals fully embrace it, others identify marginally or not at all.