

## Sign of the Times

Washington D.C.'s NoMa is a pioneering neighborhood for the deaf community *By Cari Shane*

THEY'RE OUT OF RED BEAR CIDER at Washington, D.C.'s Red Bear Brewing Co., which poses linguistic challenges as well as commercial ones. "You can say, '12 is like that,'" says lead bartender Sara Reynolds, addressing staff at a team meeting. She pulls her open hand away from her chest, pinching together her thumb and middle finger—American Sign Language for the word "like."

Morning meetings at Red Bear always include ASL words of the day, and staff is required to know the ASL alphabet. Each item on the menu has a corresponding letter or number for easy ordering in ASL, and the hostess is ASL-fluent. The brewery also provides an ASL interpreter for all of its spoken events, and hosts ASL yoga and trivia contests.

It's part of a growing movement in the neighborhood, but it has roots in history. A few blocks from Red Bear is Gallaudet University, the liberal arts school for the deaf that has been part of the neighborhood since it was chartered by Abraham Lincoln in 1864. The adjacent NoMa (North of Massachusetts Avenue) neighborhood, meanwhile, is emerging as the center of the city's deaf culture, a fact that is reflected in the growing number of businesses that cater to the community.

Along with outdoor outfitter REI, Red Bear is housed in a renovated 1940s ice arena. Outside the building, sidewalks provide "signing space"—room to walk and sign—and benches that face each other, allowing for "conversation circles," both ASL design terms. A block away, the recently opened Swampoodle Park has "open sight lines," says its designer Jeff Lee. The benches around the park are curved, another nod to the deaf community.

About a year ago, a few blocks south of here, Starbucks opened its first U.S. "signing store." The majority of the coffee shop's 25 employees are deaf. There is no music playing



Clockwise: The first Starbucks "signing store" in the U.S.; a patron at Biergarten Haus near Gallaudet University; curved park benches encourage visual conversation



here and no one shouting order pickups. A large television monitor lets customers know when their drinks are ready.

Elsewhere, local restaurant staff who don't know ASL carry pens and paper, learn to tap deaf people on the shoulder to get their attention, and make sure lighting isn't too dim so signers can see their conversations. Next year, the area's first deaf-owned restaurant, Mozzarella, will open here.

"It is quite heartening to see Mozzarella coming to H Street," says Robb Dooling, an editor at the U.S. Department of State, who is deaf. "It is meaningful to the community that NoMa-area businesses emphasize accessibility."

While Dooling is a transplant to the neighborhood, he says he couldn't feel more at home. "We enjoy socializing at interpreted events and captioned films. We love wandering into REI or the Union Market Trader Joe's and realizing an employee knows ASL and is able to help us."



Union Market is not only a gathering place for members of the deaf community—many of the stalls are operated by deaf people. Just outside the market, the iconic Politics and Prose bookstore provides ASL interpreters for events, while the children's section offers books featuring deaf characters. "We perk up when we find them," says manager Jennifer McDivitt. The speaker series Nerds in NoMa, too, offers ASL interpreters.

"What's happening here is a welcome step forward," says Dooling. "We dream of many deaf-owned businesses here and many more hearing people learning at least the sign-language alphabet."