

Library lends ear to deaf employee, co-workers to learn sign language

By Joe Starita

Debra Sumpter sits at a desk in the Processing Division of Love Library during the afternoon and ponders the question: Who are your favorite musicians?

The Beatles?
She laughs, shakes her head, pulls her honey-blond hair over a blue windbreaker, grabs a sheet of paper, writes an answer and shoots it back across the desk. "Paul Anka."

Sumpter, 23, has been legally deaf for the last 17 years. That has not prevented her from enjoying the sound of Anka's "I Did it My Way." She merely does it her way: strapping a set of stereo headphones on, turning the volume up full-blast and singing along, with a lyric sheet in hand, to the faint sounds she hears coming through the headset.

Nor has it prevented her from maintaining an apartment, crying over her favorite book ("Gone with the Wind"), watching the same favorite movie, cooking large meals, weaving rugs or getting to work by bus each morning at 8.

Full-time employee

Work for Sumpter is helping the Processing Division

catalog books. Hired last May as a clerk typist, she is the first legally deaf person to be employed full-time at Love Library.

"She does the same work here as our other three clerk typists," says Sandy Herzinger, Sumpter's supervisor. "We write out our instructions to Debra, or show her what we want done. It would be better, though, if someone here knew sign language."

That situation is about to change, however, explains Peggy Brown, an assistant librarian and Sumpter's friend.

"Starting next week, myself and three others from Processing will be taking a six to eight-week course in sign language at Southeast Community College," Brown said. "I think that will help out now and certainly prepare us for the future."

Brown asks Sumpter if she agrees.

The hand-written response slides back across the desk with an emphatic "Yes" penciled in.

"It would be a lot nicer for me if I had someone here to talk to," she writes.

Gets tired

She gets a new sheet of paper and continues: "I get tired and a little bored, sometimes, but I like this job. I don't think I'm given as much responsibility as the other typists, though."

Born in California, she moved with her family four years later to Colorado Springs, Colo. At the age of six she became ill (she said she doesn't remember the exact illness) and became deaf as a result of it.

She was graduated from the Colorado School of Deaf at Colorado Springs in 1972, and moved to Lincoln with her mother three years later.

She enrolled in a nine-month typing course at the Lincoln School of Commerce in 1975, but was forced to leave after four months when a sign language counselor was no longer available.

Several months later, she enrolled in a six-month training course with the Handy Unit (a federally-funded program designed to provide skills for the handicapped) on UNL's campus.

Her typing skills were refined there, using a typewriter rigged with a light flash instead of a bell to signal the margin's end.

Asked if her job as a clerk typist will keep her happy in the future, she laughs once more, shakes her head, pulls her hair over the blue windbreaker, grabs another sheet of paper, writes an answer and shoots it across the desk.

"No way. Someday I would like to try keypunching and working some more with terminal computers."

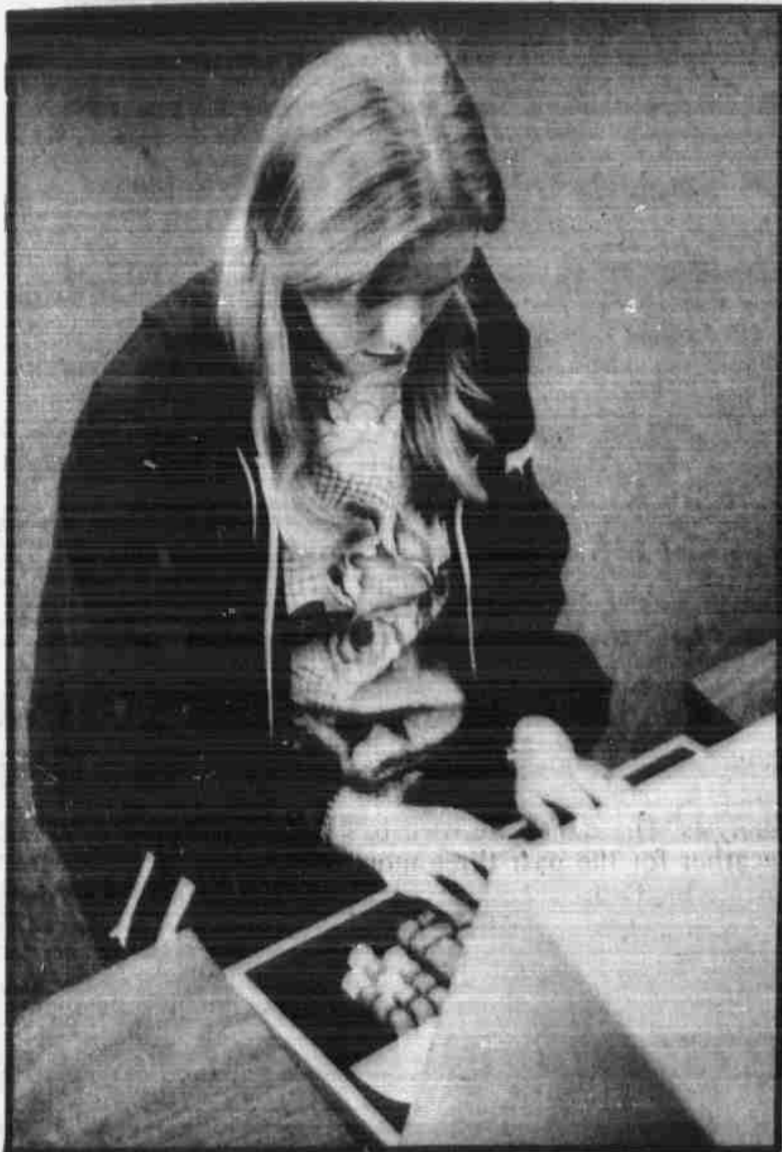


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Debra Sumpter is the first legally deaf person to be employed full-time at Love Library.

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