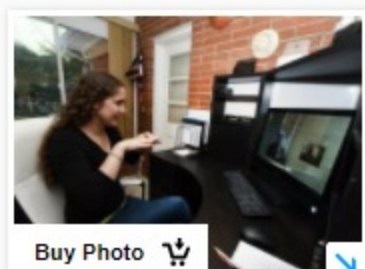


## Program helps boost student fluency in sign language

Holly Fournier, The Detroit News Published 12:24 a.m. ET May 23, 2017



(Photo: Photos by Max Ortiz / The Detroit News)

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*Grosse Pointe Farms* — Ashlee Trempus' hands flew silently through the air, her eyes bright and her face expressive. On her computer screen, Geo Roarke responded with a flurry of hand signals of his own.

The two sat nearly 2,000 miles apart — Trempus in Grosse Pointe Farms and Roarke in Phoenix, Arizona — but were linked by their fluency in American Sign Language and an online, virtual immersion program called [SignOn](#).

Trempus created the website last year to provide ASL students like herself access to deaf "ambassadors," like Roarke, to practice signing, interpretation and conversational skills.

The website was born out of necessity for Trempus, who was homebound with health issues during her studies to become a certified ASL interpreter.

"I still took my classes but during the program, while you're trying to become an interpreter, you have to get over 200 hours of interaction with the deaf community," she said. "There are these things called deaf coffee chats, or deaf night out; they happen about once a month, but they happen all over the state, so you really have to travel to different cities to be able to interact. For me, that was too hard. It wasn't possible, especially when I was sick."

She launched the site in February 2016 with help from co-founder Paul Fugate, a sign language teacher and interpreter who translated services at her church. Fugate, 43, has also taught sign language at Oakland University for 15 years and at Romeo High School for five, and interprets telephone calls for deaf and hearing individuals.

SignOn is now a finalist in the [Quicken Loans Detroit Demo Day](#) scheduled for Thursday in Detroit. It joins 19 other businesses selected from a pool of more than 600 applications and will compete for a share of \$1 million in capital. Eight winners will receive prizes ranging from \$50,000 to \$200,000.

Trempus and Fugate initially self-funded the site with help from a \$25,000 grant from the Innovation Fund Macomb Community College and a bank loan.

SignOn employs 25 deaf ambassadors from throughout the country, who set their own schedules and provide 30-minute video chat sessions to paying SignOn clients. They are paid \$15 an hour and complete training sessions with Trempus before booking their first appointments. Students pay \$25 for a half-hour session, \$45 for two sessions and \$100 for five sessions. No membership or subscription is required.

"Once you purchase your minutes, you are able to schedule your sessions," said Trempus, adding that ambassadors are available seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. "On the client profile, there's a highlighted calendar and if it's highlighted green, that means someone is available, and you can click on that time."

Clients cannot pick which ambassador hosts their chats, Trempus said.

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"The reason we do that is every deaf person has their own signing style, just like when you go to the south and people have different accents," she said. "We wanted to expose our clients to all the different mannerisms, signing styles, accents and rhythms."

The website is used in ASL classes at several Michigan colleges, including Oakland University, Madonna University, Henry Ford College, Mott Community College and Macomb Community College. Trempus hopes to secure partnerships with 20 schools by the end of the year and to eventually integrate her program into all of the state's 42 schools with sign languages programs.

"ASL has its own grammar structure; it has its own syntax; it has its own linguistics," Trempus said. "It's truly a foreign language, and the school systems are now considering it a foreign language."

Madonna University students in Livonia were able to use SignOn for required interaction hours this semester, according to student and aspiring interpreter Olivia Baranski.

"I plan on using it myself through out the summer, just so I can stay current," said Baranski, a 21-year-old Garden City native. "It's that added bonus."

Fugate offers SignOn to his Oakland University students as the preferred method to complete required interaction hours. In-person "deaf events" are accepted, but Fugate said he believes SignOn provides a more reliable venue for practice.

"At in-person events, the problem is they'll sit back and do nothing. They'll just observe," said Fugate, a Detroit resident. "We want them to play an active role in their education."

Conversations on SignOn can cover a wide range of topics and skill levels, from basic vocabulary to fluent interactions. Text boxes accompany the videos in case users get stuck.

"SignOn is very flexible and it's one-on-one. It's a helpful tool," said Ben Mielke, a 36-year-old deaf ambassador from Pontiac. He and other ambassadors spoke to The Detroit News in a series of video chats, with Trempus acting as interpreter.

Fugate said the site provides more than a paycheck for the ambassadors, many who have dreams of becoming teachers but struggle to pass a standard, written teacher certification test.

"English is not their first language," Fugate said of deaf children. "SignOn allows deaf people to become the teacher. It empowers them to teach their own language."

Fugate said SignOn addresses a paradox in the interpreting community: In order to fulfill a shortage of interpreters, ASL students must have access to fluent individuals for practice. But because of the shortage and small deaf community, finding people with whom to interact is difficult.

"Ashlee (Trempus) and I both struggled in college to meet deaf people," he said. "Where do you go? What does a deaf person look like? They're hard to find. They look like us."

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