

Christie Cohn

▼ Barry University ▼ 4.0 GPA
▼ Senior in Psychology

While most student leaders impact their campuses in a variety of ways, 23-year-old Christie Cohn sees each of her positions as a vehicle to further her favorite cause: bringing the deaf and hearing communities closer together. “My mom was the one who originally got me involved with sign language,” says Cohn, who at 16 first took a class with her mother. “I just fell in love with the language. I was learning about a group of people who have traditions, idioms, jokes, and stories and have lived through suppression and discrimination. It was in essence a culture that people really don’t recognize, because there isn’t a deaf America — there’s not a land of the deaf — so it’s more hidden.”

Florida Leader magazine, First Union National Bank of Florida, and Publix Super Markets proudly recognize Christie Cohn of Barry University as first runner-up of the 1998 Florida College Student of the Year Award.

Since completing interpreter training at Miami-Dade Community College in 1992, Cohn has worked as an interpreter, taught American Sign Language courses, presented lectures, and tutored deaf students and their families. “A lot of the younger deaf don’t really set their mind on a university degree,” says Cohn, who uses her earnings as an interpreter along with scholarships and loans to pay for school. “They don’t know much about sex education and AIDS, and in fact, a lot of their families have not learned sign language,” she says. “If you can’t tell your child, ‘Hey, what do you want for dinner?’ you can’t say to them, ‘There’s a disease out there that could kill you.’”

A visible campus leader — she’s Travel and Tour Chair for the Campus Activities Board, Secretary of Ambassadors, and a tutor and student rep for the Psychology Department — Cohn turns every curious student’s inquiry into an opportunity to spread the word. “Sign language is very

visual,” Cohn explains. “People will ask me where I learned it and how they can get involved. That opens up communication and I can educate even on a one-to-one basis.”

In her quest to bring two worlds together, Cohn doesn’t limit her work only to opening up new avenues for deaf students. “On the flip side of that, I’m trying to let people in the hearing world know that deaf individuals



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aren’t like the old phrase ‘deaf and dumb,’” she says. “The only difference is they can’t hear.”

Cohn founded Signs And Wonders (SAW) in 1994, a performance group that promoted deaf culture awareness through the arts and entertainment. Cohn also teamed up with local vocalist Diane Ward to sign at her concerts and in a music video for “The Gift” to benefit the Riccardia Children’s Program, part of the Health Crisis Network for kids with AIDS. While at MDCC, Cohn also studied abroad, taking her skills as an

interpreter to Switzerland, England, France, and Italy.

Cohn says it’s essential for leaders to have an open mind. “No matter what you do, you’re going to be faced with a variety of opinions, cultures, and backgrounds,” she says. “If you’re going to want the people who work with you to follow you or agree with you, then you have to know what their concerns and needs are.

“In just being around the deaf, I understand discrimination to an extent,” Cohn says. “I can see how people react to them, and I can indirectly see how frustrating it can be to be discriminated against — you can’t really do anything about it, because if you’re deaf, you’re deaf, and when you’re black, you’re black.”

Leadership is an assumed role for Cohn, who is generous with her time and unlikely to miss an opportunity to meet an organization’s needs. “I just fell into certain positions. I’ve never really said, ‘I want to join because I want to become president.’” For example, as vice president of her MDCC Phi Theta Kappa chapter, Cohn ended up filling the Five Star Program Coordinator post she created to track the group’s progress and achieve the goal of becoming a Five Star Chapter.

According to Kathy Bunting, director of student activities at Barry, “She’s outstanding. She’s always there to lift everybody up and get them excited about what they’re doing.” Bunting adds that Cohn’s involvement in the programming board opened doors for deaf students who may have faced communication barriers before. “She doesn’t need to be in the spotlight — that’s not her focus,” Bunting says. “She may not always be the leader of the group, but she’s the driving force behind it.”

“Christie has taught me to be strong, think positive, and trust in myself,” says Vivian Diaz, a Barry University student for whom Cohn has tutored and served as interpreter for four years. “Christie has taken her time on Saturdays to help me with my SCUBA Diving class.

Christie herself had to join the class so she can understand everything clearly in order to help me.”

As a friend to her deaf peers, Cohn passes along the empowering message she grew up with: anything is possible if you set your mind to it. “My parents have always raised my sister and I that we can do whatever we want, and when we choose a goal, to do it to the best of our ability,” says Cohn, whose greatest reward is seeing others live up to their potential. “When I see others succeed, I know I’ve succeeded.” 🐾