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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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From the issue dated October 2, 1991

PORTRAIT

A Professor Champions Distinct Culture of Deaf People

By Ellen K. Coughlin

Boston, Massachusetts -- Harlan Lane, a professor of psychology at Northeastern University, once received a compliment he says he cherishes. "The thing about Harlan," an acquaintance remarked, "is that he's got hearing hands but a deaf brain."

At first pass, that might sound like an insult. But Mr. Lane's friend is deaf, and her intended message was high praise indeed: He may use sign language like the hearing person he is, but he thinks like a deaf one.

Recently, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation paid its own form of tribute to Mr. Lane's "deaf brain": a \$325,000 fellowship recognizing his 17 years of research on deafness and activism on behalf of deaf people.

The list of Mr. Lane's accomplishments in the field of deafness is long and varied. He is the author of a landmark history of the deaf, *When the Mind Hears* (Random House, 1984). He was instrumental in helping the government of Burundi establish its first school for the deaf, and in bringing a young deaf girl from Burundi to the United States to study at the high school affiliated with Gallaudet University. He is a member of a research team at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary that is working on cochlear implants, a device that can restore some hearing to deaf and hearing-impaired people. He founded Northeastern's program in American Sign Language.

The important thread connecting all of that is Mr. Lane's conviction that the million or so Americans who grow up deaf and use sign language are part of a distinct culture -- in his words, a "linguistic minority" -- with their own history, their own arts, and, most important, their own language.

In fact, Mr. Lane, a specialist in psycholinguistics, came to the field of deafness through a long-standing interest in speech and language. While a visiting professor at the University of California at San Diego in 1973-74, he became more closely acquainted with the work of Ursula Bellugi, a psychologist at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies whose research helped demonstrate that American Sign Language possessed the properties of a natural language.

"I was overwhelmed," Mr. Lane says. "The idea that language

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didn't have to be spoken was completely novel. It meant that language was a capacity of the brain, and if it didn't come out one way, it would come out another. That was a flabbergasting idea, I thought, of tremendous potential importance to psycholinguistics."

As he became involved in his own research on deafness and began to meet more and more deaf people, Mr. Lane made a second discovery that was nearly as startling.

"I discovered that they were getting a raw deal," he says. "I found deaf people angry, claiming that the least of their problems was a hearing loss, that the biggest of their problems was the refusal of hearing people to accept deafness and the deaf agenda."

Over time, it seems, he has come to share that anger.

One of Mr. Lane's most recent projects is a book, to be published in the spring, called *The Mask of Benevolence: Biopower and the Deaf Community*. It is a stinging critique of what he sees as the self-serving agendas of the professions that purportedly serve the deaf -- audiologists and hearing-aid manufacturers, social workers, and, not least, educators of the deaf.

"Deaf education is not interested in deaf people," Mr. Lane says. He argues that there are too few deaf teachers of the deaf, that hearing teachers of the deaf often have little facility in sign language, and that professional associations and journals for educators of the deaf pay too little attention to matters like sign language and deaf culture.

Worst of all, in his mind, is the nearly universal insistence in this country that deaf children be taught in English, rather than American Sign Language.

Educators have cast the matter as a methodological issue, he says, but he sees it as a question of minority rights.

"In the case of deaf children," Mr. Lane says, "using American Sign Language is their right. It's their heritage. It's self-affirming. And, in addition, I want to say to people, 'For Christ's sake, they're deaf. What could be clearer?'"

Deaf people themselves have grown increasingly insistent in recent years on their status and rights as a linguistic minority, a movement that reached its apex in 1988 with the student protests at Gallaudet University that resulted in the naming of a deaf person to be the institution's new president. Against that background, Mr. Lane seems sensitive to the uncomfortable irony that the first MacArthur fellowship ever awarded to someone in the field of deafness went to a hearing person.

"There are so many deaf people doing really fine work," he says. "In my eyes, the logic would be that, if you were going to make an award in this area, you would choose one of them."

In fact, he regards his hearing as a handicap in his work, since he can never intimately know the culture he is studying.

"I'd like to think, though," he adds, "that hearing people who listen to deaf people and who conclude that their demands are legitimate have something special to offer, to both deaf and hearing. I'd like to believe that, and it's a premise of my professional work.

"When I no longer believe it, I'll stop."

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