

**Speaker:** Shawn and Dee Collins

**Broadcast Date:** August 17, 2008

**Interviewer:** Arthur Lightbody

**Primary Topic(s):** WordSign, a JAARS sign-language project; translating with the Deaf

**Other Topics:** 2D and 3D animations, SignWriting

**Location Discussed:** Wycliffe Sweden and Asia

**People Group (if named):** Deaf communities

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*Lightbody:*

It is good to have Dee and Shawn Collins with us today. They work in a very specialized ministry in Wycliffe Bible Translators. How are you today, Dee?

*D. Collins:*

Doing great, thank you.

*Lightbody:*

It is good to have you with us in Waxhaw, here at the JAARS center. I know you might be here a bit longer than expected, but we've had an opportunity to get to know about your ministry. What is the ministry God has prepared you for?

*D. Collins:*

Amazingly, He has called us to work on a sign-language project with Wycliffe Bible Translators.

*Lightbody:*

How did you come across an assignment like this? Did you have some involvement with people that were Deaf? What happened?

*D. Collins:*

We get asked that question quite a bit. We don't have any background with the Deaf, or Deaf children or Deaf parents or grandparents, but I think it comes from a willing heart and a love for other people and love for God's Word and getting His Word into the heart language of many. This started when I was in Bible college, and one of the courses I was taking was "Worldwide Perspectives." Our local church in California was actually hosting Worldwide Perspectives, so I could take it for credit, and I asked Shawn to come along and take it with me, and he could audit the class. On our first night there, we were approached by a Wycliffe representative who found it interesting the work an animator would do. Later on he told us about the work that a visionary in the United Kingdom had for a sign-language project.

*Lightbody:*

I'd heard of Wycliffe praying for a person just like Shawn. It is really neat how God worked. Now I am going to switch and play the naive person: I don't get it. People can read. Can't the Deaf read the Bible in their language? Can't they read French or English? What is this about separate languages?

*D. Collins:*

It is a good question, one that is often raised. You know, written words are made up of letters that represent sounds the Deaf have never heard before—basically phonics. Although many Deaf have

learned to read through sight memorization of words, sign language is their heart language. You know, in Wycliffe we are involved in getting the Word of God into each heart language. Since sign language has its own vocabulary and grammar structure, it usually has no relation to the local verbal and written language.

*Lightbody:*

I'm sure that's a new concept for some people today. How many different sign languages do you think there are in the world?

*D. Collins:*

We are still working on that through survey work, but right now we know there are a bit more than 200 languages that have been surveyed. Some people believe we could get up to 400 or a bit more. The biggest misconception is that sign language is a universal language.

*Lightbody:*

You came to JAARS originally passing through, is that correct?

*D. Collins:*

Originally we did come to JAARS to wait on our work visas. During this time there were a lot of meetings going on, and JAARS showed a lot of interest in the sign-language project. They have since taken on the sign-language project to manage it, and we agreed that for the first phase we would stay here at JAARS so it would be more productive.

*Lightbody:*

Let's jump to the process of Deaf translation, Dee. What are some of the ways that Wycliffe has done translation for Deaf languages?

*D. Collins:*

Most sign-language projects have little more than a single gospel translated, or several gospel stories. Some of the methods used have been video, line drawings and SignWriting, which is an iconic writing system. But video is not the best method in most projects. Linear editing of a video can be expensive and time-consuming, and long-term involvement of a native signer cannot be guaranteed. So video continuity can be broken by refilming a signer whose appearance has changed over time, and this can be very distracting to the viewer. There can also be identity issues for a signer being videotaped in a closed country. The signer could be jeopardizing his own security as well as other Deaf and evangelical translation projects.

*Lightbody:*

Now we are going to talk about the approach we can use that cuts through those barriers. So let's talk with Shawn. Shawn, can you tell us about your career briefly, before you joined Wycliffe?

*S. Collins:*

For years I was in IT [information technology] work. I became interested, though, in animation and started studying that and developing animations. Right before joining Wycliffe, I was doing character animation for an educational video game for a college. I'd been studying some advanced character

animations and wanted to break out and do some realistic 3D animations. That's when the Lord called me to work with the sign-language project.

*Lightbody:*

How does animation work in this sign-language effort? Can you explain that to us?

*S. Collins:*

What we are creating is a tool to help translate Scripture into signed content using 3D animation. The output has different forms. We can have 3D animation output; we can have 2D static images, which are derived from the 3D.

Also, something Dee mentioned was the iconic SignWriting. By constructing signs from individual and facial movements, a dictionary of signs can be created, and this dictionary can then be used to translate text into a sign-language grammar. Since the user input is icon-based, it does not rely on spoken language and makes it possible for a Deaf person unfamiliar with any spoken language to directly create signed content without the need for programming or animation skills. Since animation is nonlinear, it will be easier than video editing to edit the content, reducing the cost and the time of traditional production methods. Using 3D characters, we can change from male to female; we can change the ethnicity and the clothing so it is culturally relevant. The other benefit is that it ensures a visual consistency throughout the entire signed output, which is something that cannot be guaranteed with video.

We are creating a tool to be able to create the content. There are a lot of Deaf communities that prefer chronological Bible stories and others that prefer just a straight line-by-line Bible translation. We are really creating the tool that allows them to create the content.

*Lightbody:*

So the actual translation work of putting that Deaf language into an animated form is done in that language community, in that Deaf language—it is not done here at Waxhaw.

*S. Collins:*

Exactly. And that is why it is so important to have the Deaf involved.

*Lightbody:*

Dee, would you like to add to what Shawn just said about the involvement in the Deaf community?

*D. Collins:*

Only the Deaf can do sign-language translation. They may be able to work almost independently, or they may need hearing people to assist with various aspects of the work, like Shawn and the animation. But there must always be Deaf involved. In addition, Wycliffe Sweden has accepted the first Deaf member of Wycliffe. The organization DOOR is working on at least 10 projects, and Deaf people have a major role in all of them.

We know of three other projects in Asia with which sign language is associated. They use Deaf people with the major involvement. In parts of Europe, Sweden and Norway, it is the Deaf who have taken the initiative to do the translation work.

*Lightbody:*

Certainly the Deaf population isn't physically listening to this audio program today. How do we get people involved? How is God going to make this happen, that more Deaf people will be involved in sign-language translations?

*D. Collins:*

That is a good question. But I asked myself, "How did we get involved in the beginning?" It really is by the grace of God and the Holy Spirit, how He works in us. For Shawn and me, just being a light to other people, getting the translation work out, praying about it, asking other people—especially the Deaf—to come here to the JAARS center, see what it is all about, see how they can support missionaries and be involved themselves.

*Lightbody:*

How can people contact you, Dee, about involvement in the sign-language project?

*D. Collins:*

You can contact us at [sign@sil.org](mailto:sign@sil.org). \*

*Lightbody:*

Thank you very much, Shawn and Dee, for your time with us today, and everybody have a great day.

*\* This email address is specifically for contact with the Collins regarding their ministry with signed languages; it is not an official organizational contact address regarding sign language translation in general.*