

DESERT

FEBRUARY 2016

# OUTLOOK

## EVERYDAY HEROES

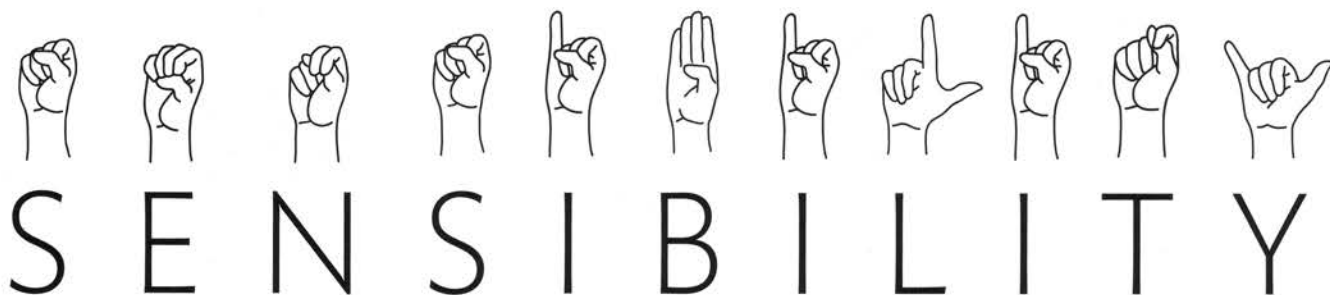
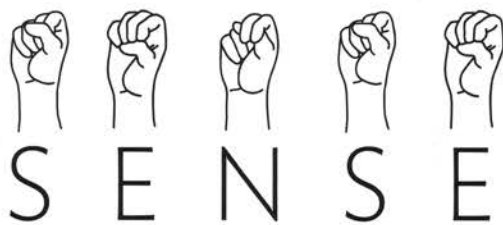
ALEXIS ORTEGA + 6  
VALLEY WOMEN REDEFINE  
LGBT LEADERSHIP

COMEDIAN JASON  
STUART GETS REEL  
SERIOUS ABOUT  
HOLLYWOOD

GAY & DEAF — WHY  
IT'S NOT A DISABILITY


SAVOR THE SPIRIT  
OF PALM SPRINGS'  
MODERN COCKTAILS





## Desert residents offer insight into gay & Deaf community

BY PATRICK BARTLETT | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAKE STANFORD

 You may not have noticed, but almost every time you're out on the town for theater, movies, dining, and socializing at the local watering holes, there are probably Deaf folks nearby. It's true: a sizable, active, deaf, LGBT community thrives in the Coachella Valley.

My partner and I have developed many rewarding friendships with men and women who are Deaf (capital D denotes the community) and living right here in Palm Springs. Surprisingly, communication with our friends is not the obstacle that some imagine it is, because the Deaf community is well equipped to help us share meaningful conversations even though we lack fluency in American Sign Language (ASL). Communication's even easier now, with smartphones

and a plethora of Deaf-oriented apps.

ASL is not merely pantomimed English; it's a separate language fully developed with its own grammar and syntax, and is the third or fourth most used language in the U.S. ASL is also a handy language for a hearing person to know when trying to communicate in a crowded, noisy place, and the only other alternative is shouting into someone's ear. If you think about it, who amongst us doesn't speak to some degree with our hands?

To help introduce you to the desert's vibrant Deaf community, we compiled a list of questions for three of our accomplished, prominent deaf neighbors. Let's meet them, and allow their responses and stories to enlighten us all.



## BUTCH ZEIN

Born in Oklahoma and raised in Texas, Butch Zein comes from an all-Deaf family that goes back five generations. Like many Deaf professionals, Zein graduated from Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., with a degree in psychology. When it comes to growing up Deaf and gay, he explains that many of the obstacles are the same as they are for hearing LGBT people: stereotypes of weakness, fear of abuse if you choose to express who you really are, and until recently, not being able to marry.

Zein and his bilingual hearing husband, Allen Baki, moved to Palm Springs from San Francisco mostly because owning a mid-century modern home was Baki's dream. As soon as Baki retired, they made the move.

Zein continues to work full-time; he travels for the Deafhood Foundation conducting deaf culture seminars that bring understanding and awareness of services, support, and resources available to deaf folks living all over the country.

"Access, access, access" is how Zein succinctly identifies the challenges of being deaf in the desert. This is

primarily because the valley has a long way to go in implementing one of the key Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements for deaf people: interpreters to ensure equal access at the DMV, the doctor's office, and many other places that hearing folks who speak English and Spanish take for granted. At this time, to get an interpreter you must request one in advance. Zein is a part of lobbying efforts for better services.

Another major challenge Zein sees is the need for hearing people to understand that being deaf does not mean you're disabled, uneducated, and dependent on others. For most Deaf people this is far from true. "The Deaf community is no different than the hearing community," he writes. "Both have vast arrays of people with different levels of education and success."

Zein would love to see the narrative change from thinking of Deaf people as members of the majority with a handicap to members of a minority with a specific culture and language. "If we can shift this perception," he adds, "it will put us all on equal footing with a focus on working together for the benefit of all."



# MARY ANNE PUGIN

Like many desert residents, Mary Anne Pugin is an active retiree. But her journey to the desert began in Corpus Christi, Texas, where she was born into a hearing family. Because her father was a naval officer, the family frequently moved. Pugin had to attend three different schools in the fifth grade alone.

Growing up the only deaf person in a hearing family presented huge challenges for Pugin. "Growing up, since my family did not know sign language, I was not a full participating member in family activities," she explains. "I could not understand the banter around the dinner table, nor did I benefit from 'family news' and other information that my hearing siblings received on a daily basis. Holiday and other gatherings with relatives were even more difficult. I had a loving and caring family, truly I did, but after being asked the usual questions — 'How are you? How is school? How is your summer vacation?' — I was then left to fend for myself."

After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in English from Gallaudet and a Master of Arts in education administration and supervision from Cal State Northridge, Pugin spent 30 years in Washington, D.C., working for

Gallaudet in admissions and alumni relations.

The move to Palm Springs followed her retirement from U.S. Customs and Border Protection in Arizona, where she'd worked as a missions support assistant. She and her partner at the time decided to end their relationship, and she chose Palm Springs because of the Deaf community here.

"Living close to a Deaf community was important to me and when I discovered that I personally knew several Deaf people who lived in, or near, [the] Coachella Valley, I moved here in October 2008 and purchased my Palm Springs condo in spring 2009."

Pugin says one thing she'd most like the hearing community to understand about the Deaf community is, "We are a vibrant community. We are educated, we work, we sustain the economy, and we pay taxes." She adds, "We appreciate respect and awareness about our language." To her point, Pugin reminds us that many in the Deaf community could hear when they were younger, and it's not uncommon for hearing people to become deaf as they age.

As for the challenges that come with being gay as well as Deaf, Pugin says, "It was never an issue; if they said anything bad I couldn't hear them."

To capitalize or not? Ken Mikos says when writing about the community, "Deaf with an uppercase D denotes those who identify themselves as part of the Deaf culture, and use ASL. Lowercase deaf is the term used to identify those who have a hearing loss but do not see themselves as part of the Deaf culture, share their values or use ASL."

Studies show there are more than 300 specific deaf genes. Being deaf is not a disorder, it's a genetic variation, much like being born with red hair versus brown, or being born gay.

Cochlear implants are controversial in the Deaf community. Most believe it should be a conscious choice, and not a procedure that a parent imposes on an infant born deaf.

Watching Deaf people signing when not a part of the conversation is just as rude as hearing people eavesdropping on a nearby conversation.

ASL was born in 19th century New England alongside other causes including abolition and women's suffrage.

ASL was heavily influenced by the French, and is completely different from British Sign Language.

ASL follows the same patterns as spoken languages; there are family dialects, regional dialects, and regional accents.

Facial expression is just as critical to learning the language as hand signs.

Upon getting to know you, Deaf people will assign you a signing name. This is a very special moment and only happens once you have truly connected. That takes time. Be patient.

Communities that have Deaf learning institutions tend to influence the surrounding culture with greater deaf awareness. Many hearing people pick up signing simply because they are more exposed to Deaf people who live amongst them. Our closest institution is the California School for the Deaf, Riverside.

Born in New Jersey, Ken Mikos grew up around parents and a sibling who are also Deaf. Like Zein and Pugin, he graduated from Gallaudet, but with a Bachelor of Arts in American history and a Master of Arts in teaching. He spent 35 years in San Francisco before moving to Palm Springs.

Mikos taught high school social studies at the California School for the Deaf, Berkeley (now located in Fremont) for nine years and was a professor of ASL at CSU East Bay for 25 years. He's co-authored and continues to revise a series of ASL textbooks called "Signing Naturally."

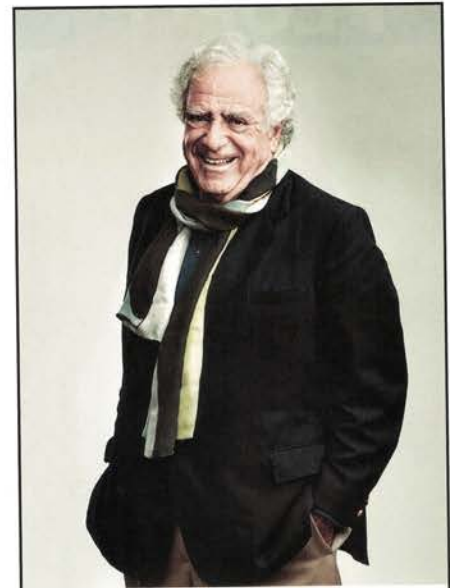
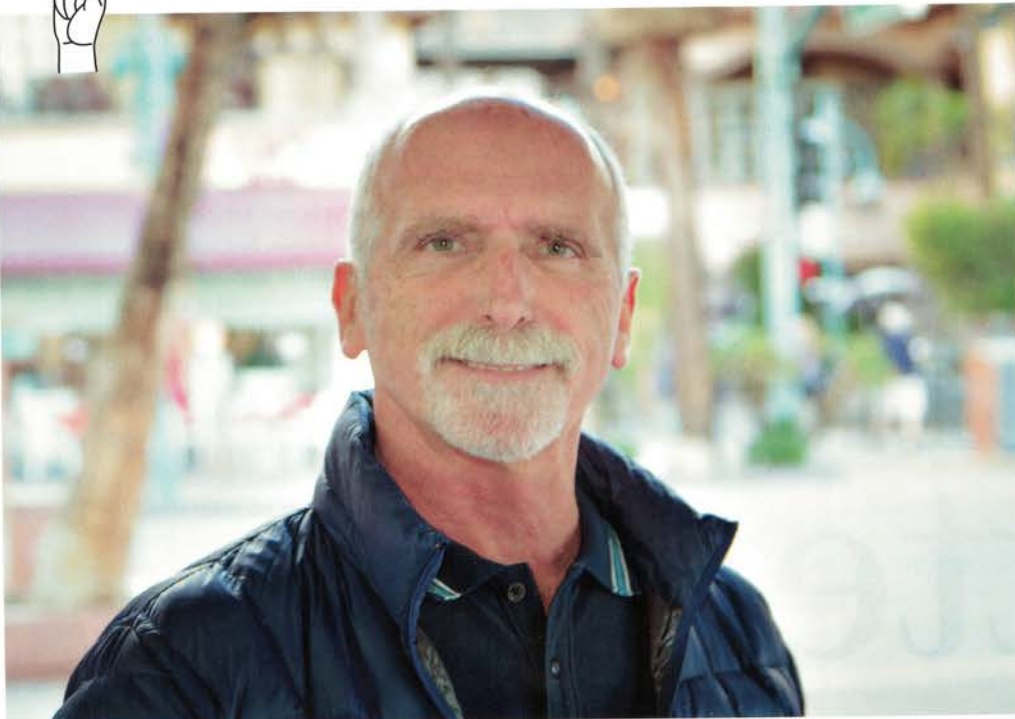
About living in the valley, Mikos says in writing, "It's a gorgeous place to live — we are surrounded by beautiful mountains, with an abundance of sunshine throughout the year. I also enjoy being part of a strong Deaf gay community that exists here in the valley." He agrees with the others that the desert's Deaf community needs equal access to theaters, public meetings, and the many festivals that occur.

For Mikos it's important for the hearing community to understand about the Deaf community: "We have a tight-knit community and we share a kinship with Deaf people all over the world. Many of us, myself included, grew up in residential schools where ASL was used primarily outside of the classroom. Over the years, we've stayed in close contact with each other. But our circle of friends continues to grow as we meet Deaf people from other parts of the world."

About hearing folks and ASL, Mikos writes, "Most often, they are inspired to learn more about the language and our culture. Learning ASL however can be challenging — it is like learning another foreign language. It takes time and practice."

Mikos, Pugin, and Zein are just three among many of our desert neighbors who are Deaf. Getting to know their beautiful, vibrant culture, and improving interactions with their community will help new friendships germinate, and will help strengthen the whole community. ☼

# KEN MIKOS



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