



Aneta Brodski, a deaf teen living in New York City, discovers the power of American Sign Language poetry. As she prepares to be one of the first deaf poets to compete in a spoken-word slam, her journey leads to an unexpected collaboration.



## FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

Greetings,

I am thrilled to be sharing *Deaf Jam* with you. It has been a long and interesting journey bringing this project to fruition, and meeting Aneta Brodski—the deaf teenager who joined me on this journey—has made it all the more rewarding.

The idea for *Deaf Jam* began while I was a visiting artist teaching video/dance workshops to deaf high school students at Marlton School in Los Angeles. During one of my residencies, my students created video poems and I became privy to the extraordinary world of American Sign Language Poetry. I also was invited to a crowded teen poetry slam that was bursting with enthusiasm and talent. It occurred to me that it would be great if deaf poets were involved in that exciting youth movement filled with honest self-expression and political awareness.

I learned that few, if any, deaf poets had ever participated in the slams. In fact, most hearing teen poets I spoke to had never seen ASL poetry but were intrigued by the language. In the midst of my research I met Steve Zeitlin, Executive Director of City Lore, and Liz Wolter, a literature and English teacher at Lexington School for the Deaf. City Lore, a non-profit organization, was in the midst of producing a biennial poetry festival in Manhattan that included Deaf poets and ASL scholars. Liz had been facilitating ASL poetry electives at Lexington school, bringing in renowned poets, and producing some video poetry projects in collaboration with New York City poet guru, Bob Holman. Through Liz and the umbrella of City Lore, the Deaf Jam project and documentary moved forward.

What I learned in the process of making this film was that most deaf students have not been exposed to ASL poetry—an engaging and creative form of expression—and that many deaf students are born into hearing families where sign language is not practiced. What began as a mission to bring together hearing and deaf teens through poetry became an initiative to revitalize an endangered art form.

As you experience the film, I hope you will be inspired by Aneta's bravery and perseverance in pursuing her convictions. Completing a documentary often takes years; in this case, it took 10 years from start to finish. As we pushed through the editing process, Aneta's passionate personality became a driving force.

One could say that ASL poetry is truly an American art form and part of our cultural heritage. To quote Bob Holman: "The poetry needs to be seen in order to take its place in the World of Poetries." It is my hope that *Deaf Jam* will contribute to making that a reality. Inspired by the making of the film, a monthly ASL slam night was established at the Bowery Poetry Club by Robert Arnold, a colleague of one the project mentors. That series began six years ago. Doug Ridloff has continued to carry the torch and hosts the monthly series that is now simultaneously webcast on the third Thursday of the month—right before *Independent Lens*!

Communication and self-confidence are crucial to success in life, and empowerment lies in emphasizing what is unique to oneself. For the Deaf, many educational systems are focused on merging the Deaf into the hearing world without providing education about their cultural identity. I hope this film will inspire a new generation of deaf poets and provide a window—for you, the audience—into an extraordinary art form.

Thank you for watching *Deaf Jam*. I hope you enjoy the film.

Judy Lieff



*Judy Lieff, Producer/Director*

## THE FILM

There are many types of poetry in the world today, but one that may be new to many people is ASL poetry. ASL—American Sign Language—is the dominant mode of communication for deaf people who sign, and its poetry is a highly expressive three-dimensional art form. Filmmaker Judy Lief explores the beauty and power of American Sign Language poetry in *Deaf Jam*, the story of deaf teen Aneta Brodski's bold journey into the spoken word slam scene. It all begins with an after-school program at the Lexington School for the Deaf in Queens, New York.

Aneta—passionate, fearless, and expressive—works hard at developing her poetry. She is an emigrant from Israel and was born to an all-deaf family, unlike many of her classmates. (Approximately 92 percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents and many grow up in families where sign language is not practiced.) At the end of the first year of the project, Aneta begins to blossom as a poet.

The next year, the ASL poetry workshops open up to all deaf teens in New York City and move to Manhattan, where they share space with Urban Word, an organization at the forefront of the youth spoken word movement.

When a new opportunity—slam poetry—presents itself, Aneta seizes the opportunity to compete with her hearing peers. Every year, over five hundred teenage poets try out for the five-member New York City slam team. Aneta competes for a spot on the Urban Word slam team, a first for the Deaf community.

In ASL poetry there is no written text. Rhymes are measured in hand shapes and meter in movements. Images cut and dissolve much like clips in a film. Aneta welcomes the challenge of performing in the verbal arena of slam poetry.

Eventually, she meets Tahani Salah, a Palestinian spoken word poet from Urban Word. The two young women embark on a collaboration, creating a new form of slam poetry that transcends politics. After working long and hard to synthesize their poetry, they are invited to present their poem in a program presenting oral and signed poetry at Bob Holman's Bowery Poetry Club. In a brief interview with Holman, he expresses the crux of what is at stake for endangered languages and the Deaf community: "Survival of a culture, is survival of a language, is survival of a people."

Utilizing high-energy music, animated graphic text, and other innovative techniques, *Deaf Jam* illuminates ASL poetry's extraordinary potency and power. Taking us inside a fascinating and vibrant world where self-expression and cultural identity are fiercely pursued, *Deaf Jam* may change the way we think about the non-hearing world forever.



*Aneta Brodski hosting ASL Slam night at the Bowery Poetry Club*

## SELECTED INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN DEAF JAM

### Students

**Aneta Brodski**

**Shiran Zhavian** – Aneta's best friend

### Teachers

**Liz Wolter** – English teacher and interpreter

**Manny Hernandez** – ASL storyteller

**Terrylene Sacchetti** – Actor/artist

**Dirksen Bauman** – Deaf Studies professor, Gallaudet University

### Poets

**Peter Cook** – ASL poet; storyteller; professor at Columbia College

**Tahani Salah** – Spoken word poet (Palestinian)

**Bob Holman** – Poet; Visiting Professor, Columbia University; founder, Bowery Poetry Club

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### What is American Sign Language (ASL)?

ASL is the dominant sign language of Deaf communities in the U.S., in the English-speaking parts of Canada, and in some regions of Mexico. The language is not a signed version of English but is manual and visual, with information conveyed with the shape and movement of the hands and other parts of the body and with facial expressions.

In ASL there are five components to a sign: palm orientation, location, hand shapes, movement, and facial expression (including movements of the head, mouth, or eyebrows).

Although gesture is used in sign languages just as it is in spoken languages, a sign language is fundamentally different, with its own grammar, syntax, morphology, and other language components. Thus, ASL is quite different from British Sign Language, even though the spoken languages of both countries are the same. Historically, American Sign Language is a derivative of French Sign Language. Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc established the first permanent school in the United States for deaf students in 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut, now called the American School for the Deaf.

### What is ASL Poetry?

ASL poetry is a performance art form utilizing body language, rhythm, and movement to create a three-dimensional picture equivalent to one created by oral poetry. The similarity of hand shapes can act as alliteration, and using the same hand shape repetitively works as rhyme. Visual Vernacular (a term originated by Bernard Bragg) involves cinematic concepts, some of which are inherent in ASL. The technique involves references to close-ups, wide shots, and images dissolving into other images, as well as to “cutting” back and forth

between characters to show different points of view in a scene.

Signed poetry grew out of a tradition of playing with the language in Deaf clubs throughout the country, where deaf individuals and their families and friends would congregate for entertainment and to socialize.

ASL poetry has been described as “a kind of writing in space ... a language in motion, and, like oral poetry, truly inseparable from its realization in performance” (Edward S. Klima and Ursula Bellugi, “Poetry Without Sound,” 1983).

### Deaf Culture

Deaf culture refers to the beliefs, values, and behaviors, along with the shared institutions, of communities that are affected by deafness and that use sign language as their primary means of communication. A core view of the Deaf community is that deafness is a difference in human experience rather than a disability to be corrected. Deaf culture does not automatically include all people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Membership in the community is defined by the individual's own sense of identity. Thus, the community may include family members of deaf people and sign language interpreters. Used as a cultural label, the word *Deaf* is capitalized; when used to describe the audiological condition, the word is written with a lowercase *d*.

### Education options for the Deaf

([www.theitinerantconnection.com/history\\_of\\_deaf\\_education.htm](http://www.theitinerantconnection.com/history_of_deaf_education.htm))

From 1880 to 1960, American Sign Language was suppressed in the schools and went underground, until statistics showed that the suppression of sign language was detrimental to learning for the Deaf. In 1964, the U.S. Congress issued the Babbidge report, stating that “oralism” was a dismal failure.

For decades, the main controversy in educating the Deaf revolved around oralism vs. manualism—whether it was better to teach children sign language or to make them learn to speak orally, in order to fit into mainstream society. After being banned for more than eighty years, sign language was allowed back into schools in the 1960s.

With a variety of choices available in education of the Deaf, numerous factors need to be considered in deciding the best option for a given child. Here is an overview:

### Educational approaches

- **Bilingual-Bicultural** uses American Sign Language. English is learned through exposure to written material. Many programs offer spoken English components to the school day. For more information contact the Clerc Center at Gallaudet University ([http://www.gallaudet.edu/clerc\\_center/information\\_and\\_resources.html](http://www.gallaudet.edu/clerc_center/information_and_resources.html))
- **Auditory/Oral** uses no sign language; English is learned through residual hearing and speech.
- **Total Communication** uses a variety of sign systems—ASL, signed English, a combination of sign systems, speech and sign together, etc.



### Communication modes

Besides ASL, two other types of communication are used in deaf education:

- **Manual codes for English** is signs produced in English word order, without ASL grammatical syntax and sometimes lacking conceptual clarity.
- **Cued speech** uses eight different hand shapes in four different locations near the mouth to visually encode English speech sounds and patterns. It is not a language in itself but is meant to indicate the pronunciation of spoken words.

### Types of schools or learning environments

Here the choices include **residential schools for the Deaf, day schools, early intervention and preschool programs, mainstreaming and inclusion, self-contained classrooms, and home schooling**. Each of these environments has its benefits and drawbacks, but *mainstreaming and inclusion*, which has been the official approach in U.S. public education for about three decades, has generated the most controversy. Although this approach is meant to provide education to deaf children in a regular classroom, in fact deaf children often spend part of the day learning core subjects in a separate room, creating a sense of social isolation. Another complaint centers on the quality of sign language interpreters, who sometimes lack the qualifications necessary to provide the child access to all that is spoken as well as other sounds in the school/classroom environment.

**Sources:** [www.deafnix.com/DeafEd/OptionsGuide/Intro.html](http://www.deafnix.com/DeafEd/OptionsGuide/Intro.html) and [www.listen-up.org/edu/options1.htm](http://www.listen-up.org/edu/options1.htm)

### IDEA and Education of the Deaf

The great majority (91 percent) of deaf and hard of hearing (D/HH) students attend local public schools. Since the mid-1970s, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has steered the course of deaf education in the schools, one of its goals being the integration of deaf individuals into American society. To achieve this goal, D/HH students have been mainstreamed into general education classrooms with the intention of helping them acquire the hearing and speaking skills needed for interaction with their hearing peers.

After several years of mainstreaming, it became evident that mere physical proximity was not leading deaf and hearing students to interact, and that schools were not providing opportunities for signing D/HH students and hearing students to communicate with each other. Calls for changes to IDEA regulations by the Deaf community demanded that schools take into account the communication needs and language preferences of D/HH students in mainstreamed settings, and that ASL be one of the means of communication in mainstreamed classrooms.

In the 1999 reauthorization of IDEA, ASL was included as one of the primary languages and the preferred mode of communication of D/HH students. The resulting increase in sign interpreters with D/HH students in general education classrooms has led to an increase in interest in ASL and Deaf culture on the part of hearing students and teachers. And that in turn has provided an impetus for hearing students to request courses in ASL and for schools to offer ASL courses for foreign language credit. Over seven hundred schools in the U.S. now offer ASL programs.

Thus, IDEA, while continuing to foster the integration of deaf people into mainstream society, has provided an unintended boost for Deaf culture by opening the way for hearing students to learn about the culture and its language.

**Source:** [www.dsqsds.org/article/view/685/862](http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/685/862)

### Spoken Word, Jams, and Slams

**Spoken word** is a type of oral poetry or prose performance, related to the Beat movement of the 1950s and 1960s that was led by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and others. It is a populist and democratic art form whose performers express their feelings about religion, politics, sex and gender, life experiences, and other topics. Spoken word is usually a solo performance, sometimes done over a hip-hop beat, sometimes done as if speaking naturally. Slam poetry is considered an outgrowth of spoken word.

A **poetry jam** is an informal performance. As in the jazz jam sessions from which it originated, there is a focus on improvisation, on the performance, and on a spirit of working together among the poet-performers. The poetry may or may not be original.

The **poetry slam** was born in Chicago in 1984, the brainchild of Marc Smith, a poet and construction worker who wanted to add some spark to the open mike format of reading or reciting poetry. He established the Uptown Poetry Slam at a jazz club as a competition that included judges chosen from the audience, a scoring system, and cash prizes. The weekly event continues to run today. A slam is a competitive event, where poet-performers recite their own original work within a certain time limit, often three minutes. Slams may be "open" or "invitational" and they may be themed. Poems often, but not always, take the form of social/political commentary or criticism.

Poetry slams can feature a broad range of voices, styles, cultural traditions, and approaches to writing and performance. Some poets draw on a hip-hop style of delivery; others may incorporate a variety of gestures or body movements. The salient feature of a slam is the authority of the audience, which acts as judge and critic, ensuring that it will hear more from the poet-performers it likes.

**Sources:** [answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=2009051411739AA004mQ](http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=2009051411739AA004mQ); [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spoken\\_word](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spoken_word); [www.msu.edu/~miazgama/spokenword.htm](http://www.msu.edu/~miazgama/spokenword.htm)



## TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO DEAF JAM

A screening of *Deaf Jam* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- **Poetry and spoken word:** Defining poetry today—address the use of the internet and new software programs to either create “mash-ups” or an “integrated performance of projection and live performance.” What kind of windows and opportunities does that present to the Deaf artist?
- **Poetry slams and poetry jams**
- **Performance art**—the use of new technologies in performance for translation
- **Translation**
- **Endangered languages**
- **American Sign Language and other sign languages**
- **Deaf culture**
- **ASL poetry**
- **Media literacy**
- **Youth empowerment and leadership**

## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. What are your initial impressions of the film?
2. Did you identify with any moments or scenes in the film?
3. Have you ever been exposed to ASL poetry before?
4. Did you find anything inspiring or motivational in the film?
5. What do you think about Aneta’s decision to not be voiced at the Nuyorican Poetry Slam and then her decision to collaborate with Tahani, the spoken word poet?
6. What kind of effect do you think the poetry workshops had on Aneta?
7. What do you think about Aneta’s redefinition of “deaf” at the end of the film?



*Aneta Brodski and classmates in their first ASL Poetry Performance at Lexington School for the Deaf*

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Is ASL offered at schools in your community? If so, ask ASL students (deaf and hearing) to do a presentation about their language learning experiences for a local civic or other organization. Arrange a screening of *Deaf Jam* with the goal of having the deaf and hearing students create some poetry and perform it together at the local library or another venue. **(This will need the support of an interpreting program or organization.)**
2. Work with a local youth organization to start a poetry slam in your community. Get the participation of others who are familiar with the spoken word movement and/or hip-hop to help organize the activity. For rules and guidelines for poetry slams, check this website: [www.poetryslam.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=10&Itemid=25#4](http://www.poetryslam.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=10&Itemid=25#4)
3. Organize a poetry group that meets regularly. For each meeting, have one member choose a favorite poet whose poems are read at the meeting or shown on a computer with subtitles and lead a brief discussion about the poet. Or, make the meetings thematic, with members bringing in poems to perform about a particular topic, e.g., love, nature, separation, travel, etc.
4. Provide an opportunity for young people—hearing and deaf—in your community to develop their literacy and creative expression skills. Start a Youth Speaks chapter or a club modeled after Youth Speaks ([youthspeaks.org/voice](http://youthspeaks.org/voice)). Alternatively, work with a local youth organization such as the Boys & Girls Club to start a program modeled on Youth Speaks or another spoken word organization.

For additional outreach ideas, visit [www.itvs.org/engagement](http://www.itvs.org/engagement), the website of the Independent Television Service (ITVS). For local information, check the website of your PBS station.



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## RESOURCES

[www.deafjam.org](http://www.deafjam.org) – The official *Deaf Jam* website contains background information on the film, a deaf history timeline, and a list of resources, and will be promoting a monthly online poetry contest.

[dsdj.gallaudet.edu](http://dsdj.gallaudet.edu) – The Deaf Studies Digital Journal is a landmark online journal that is the first peer-reviewed academic and creative arts journal in American Sign Language and English. The site provides a multimedia collection of academic articles, commentary, literature, film, video, visual arts, historical footage of signed languages, and interviews, reviews, and news about community events.

### Information about deafness, Deaf culture, ASL

[www.pbs.org/weta/throughdeafeyes/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/weta/throughdeafeyes/index.html) – *Through Deaf Eyes* is a two-hour HDTV documentary that explores 200 years of Deaf life in America. The film includes interviews with prominent members of the Deaf community, including actress Marlee Matlin and Gallaudet University President Emeritus I. King Jordan.

Interwoven throughout the film are six short documentaries produced by Deaf media artists and filmmakers. Poignant, sometimes humorous, these commissioned stories bring a personalized sense of Deaf life in America to the film. Through first person accounts and the film as a whole, *Through Deaf Eyes* tells a story of conflicts, prejudice, and affirmation that ultimately reaches the heart of what it means to be human.

[www.deafnix.com/DeafEd/OptionsGuide/Intro.html](http://www.deafnix.com/DeafEd/OptionsGuide/Intro.html) – Deaf Linx is a resource for information on deafness, Deaf culture, American Sign Language and all other related topics. It is designed to be a one-stop shop for a wide variety of deaf services for deaf people and their families.

[library.rit.edu/guides/deaf-studies/internet-resources/deaf-studies-internet-resources.html](http://library.rit.edu/guides/deaf-studies/internet-resources/deaf-studies-internet-resources.html) – This listing from the Rochester Institute of Technology contains links to a comprehensive array of resources for the deaf, including assistive technologies, sports, entertainment, legal issues, and deaf literature and poetry.

### Youth culture/spoken word/poetry/ASL poetry

[youthspeaks.org/voice](http://youthspeaks.org/voice) – Youth Speaks Inc. is a nonprofit organization dedicated to spoken word education, youth development and presentation programs, with an emphasis on literacy and civic engagement.

[www.urbanwordnyc.org/uwnyc](http://www.urbanwordnyc.org/uwnyc) – Founded on the belief that teenagers can and must speak for themselves, Urban Word NYC™ (UW) has been at the forefront of the youth spoken word, poetry, and hip-hop movements in New York City since 1999.

[signmark.biz/site/en/home](http://signmark.biz/site/en/home) – Signmark (a.k.a. Marko Vuoriheimo) is the first Deaf artist to get a record deal. Signmark is signed with Warner and performs internationally, rapping with a partner who speaks. The duo incorporates video projection and filmmaking techniques into its live performances. His native language is Finnish but he performs in American Sign Language.

[www.poetry.org](http://www.poetry.org) – This is a resource site for poetry and poets.

[www.bowerypoetry.com](http://www.bowerypoetry.com) – The Bowery Poetry Club is a New York City poetry performance space founded by Bob Holman in 2002. Located at 308 Bowery between Bleecker and Houston streets in Manhattan's East Village, the BPC provides a home base for established and upcoming artists.

[bobholman.com](http://bobholman.com) – Founder of the Bowery Poetry Club and featured in the film, Bob produced the PBS series *The United States of Poetry*, which featured Peter Cook representing American Sign Language poetry. The site for the series is [www.worldofpoetry.org/usop](http://www.worldofpoetry.org/usop)

[web.mac.com/peterscook1/Site/Flying\\_Words\\_Project.html](http://web.mac.com/peterscook1/Site/Flying_Words_Project.html) – Flying Words Project is an American Sign Language poetry troupe comprised of Deaf poet Peter Cook and hearing coauthor Kenny Lerner.

[www.slope.org/archive/asl](http://www.slope.org/archive/asl) – *Slope* is a quarterly online journal that publishes original, previously unpublished poems. This special edition is devoted to ASL poets and poetry.

[deafness.about.com/od/deafliteratureandfun/a/literarycorner.htm](http://deafness.about.com/od/deafliteratureandfun/a/literarycorner.htm) – This site contains a list of stories and poems by deaf and hard of hearing people.



### Education of the Deaf

[clercschildren.com](http://clercschildren.com) – In response to Universal Newborn Hearing Screening, **Clerc's Children** provides an innovative early intervention service targeting deaf and hard of hearing infants and toddlers ages 0-5 and their parents. Clerc's Children is a web-based **dual language** curriculum filled with auditory and visual stimulation, which plays an important role in developing age-appropriate reading, writing, and communication skills.

[www.listen-up.org/edu/options1.htm](http://www.listen-up.org/edu/options1.htm) – This website contains excerpts from an issue of *Exceptional Parent*, providing explanations of education options for deaf children.

[nichcy.org/laws/idea](http://nichcy.org/laws/idea) – This website explains the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal law that lays out the guidelines for the education of children with special needs, including deaf children.

[sitemaker.umich.edu/356.silverstein/home](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/356.silverstein/home) – This website, under the auspices of the University of Michigan's Psychology Department, lists educational approaches for teaching deaf children, along with a list of schools for the Deaf in North America.

### Support organizations

[www.nad.org](http://www.nad.org) – The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) is the nation's premier civil rights organization of, by, and for deaf and hard of hearing individuals in the United States.

[nc.agbell.org/netcommunity/page.aspx?pid=348](http://nc.agbell.org/netcommunity/page.aspx?pid=348) – The Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing helps families, health care providers, and education professionals understand childhood hearing loss and the importance of early diagnosis and intervention.

[www.handsandvoices.org](http://www.handsandvoices.org) – Hands & Voices is a nationwide nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting families with children who are deaf or hard of hearing, without a bias around communication modes or methodology.

The following information is for reference should questions arise about this subject matter during discussions. The filmmaker requests that facilitators offer the resources listed if necessary but gear discussions away from these topics as they are not relevant to the film.

### Cochlear implants

[www.ohio.edu/ethics/2001-conferences/cochlear-implants-the-deaf-culture-and-ethics/index.html](http://www.ohio.edu/ethics/2001-conferences/cochlear-implants-the-deaf-culture-and-ethics/index.html) – This brief paper from Ohio University's Institute for Applied & Professional Ethics discusses Deaf culture's opposition to cochlear implants from an ethical perspective.

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cochlear\\_implant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cochlear_implant) – This site contains a clear illustration of the inner ear and location of a cochlear implant, along with links to how speech and music sound with an implant.

