

Young deaf chef's kitchen skills are smokin'

Cash injections from private companies can make all the difference when it comes to helping people get training

EULALIA SNYMAN

SHE CAN'T hear, but she certainly can cook. And 23-year-old Leena Pillay, a cookery learner from the National Institute for the Deaf (NID), is well on her way to achieving her childhood dream of becoming a chef.

Not allowing her deafness to stand in the way of her dreams, Pillay enrolled for the hospitality learnership offered by the NID College in association with the Compass Group Southern Africa's Chefs' Academy. She's currently undergoing rigorous training so she can complete the Theta-accredited (hospitality education and training authority) programme that will enable her to enter the job market.

"I only have a few months left to go," says Pillay. "To become a chef means I must be able to prepare most of the food - to be as tasty as possible - and garnish it attractively. The more I practise, the better I will become."

She doesn't regard her deafness as a barrier to success. "I have to focus and concentrate harder but I've always had a passion for cooking and naturally after three years of training, my dream is to be the best deaf chef ever."

Her family, all of whom have perfect hearing, have always encouraged her. Her mother is a teacher's aid and her father a traffic officer. She also has a brother.

Following her dreams has meant making sacrifices like living away from her Port Shepstone home in KwaZulu-Natal. The NID College is situated in Worcester in the Western Cape is the only institution that

offers occupational skills training to young deaf adults in Africa.

"Our learners come from all over Africa," says Barbara Crafford of NID College. "We have students from Zambia, Namibia and even Dubai who, like Leena, are determined to get a qualification and find employment. They're not prepared to become one of the statistics - it's estimated that 92 percent of deaf people in South Africa are unemployed."

Though there are jobs that are out of bounds for those who can't hear, she points out that there are almost as many jobs that a deaf person can excel at.

"Any job that requires hearing and extensive communication is impossible, for instance call centre jobs, receptionists, waitress jobs, to mention a few," she explains. "We offer training in the fields that are better suited to the deaf such as hospitality, upholstery, computers, office administration, beauty and construction. From next year we will also offer jewellery design."

Training the deaf is an intensive process that requires lots of one-on-one interaction, which means that the college can only accommodate a limited number of students.

However, Crafford believes the college is making a difference in helping the deaf take their rightful place in the economy. Established in 2005, the college has a placement rate of 62 percent. The deaf, she adds, often make good employees as they are committed and have above-average qualities like perseverance and can-do attitude.

"Our placement officer tirelessly markets our learners and makes employers aware of how easy it is to employ deaf employees," Crafford elaborates. "It takes some learning and sensitivity but it doesn't cost employers additional money to employ the deaf - there are no special facilities required such as ramps in the case of wheelchair-bound employees."

There are safety considerations, as the deaf cannot hear something falling that can pose a danger or for example hear water running or



GETTING SET: Leena Pillay, who is hearing impaired, has just months to go before she becomes a fully qualified chef

announcements over a PA system. Technology, however, helps ease communication between the deaf employee and his or her colleagues and bosses.

"Historically deaf people have tended to be lonely and isolated as they can't simply strike up a conversation or pick up a phone," Crafford explains. "But today they can communicate via e-mail, intranet and SMSing, which has opened up the

world to them. Our learners love their cellphones so much they hardly ever switch them off."

Crafford takes particular pride in her students because of the manner in which they overcome their disability, but she simultaneously pays tribute to companies that make it possible for them to become economically active.

"Leena's training is made possible by food services company Com-

pass Group Southern Africa," she says. "The company has invested R5.4 million over the past three years to train unemployed youth among them hearing-impaired youngsters, in food preparation at its chefs' academy."

"The students receive various allowances and stipends, free uniforms and a full set of chef's knives. This is in addition to hands-on training."

Working side by side with the hearing impaired

Ensuring effective communication with deaf colleagues

- Tap the person on the shoulder to attract their attention; talk face to face.
- Give tasks in writing.
- Draw pictures when explaining something.
- Ask the deaf person to repeat the instructions - verbally or in writing.
- Never assume a deaf person is less intelligent than you.
- Speaking in a loud voice and making exaggerated gestures is unnecessary.
- Avoid inappropriate empathy - never apologise for no apparent reason.
- Offer to shake hands - the deaf also need courteous social contact.
- Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability. Relax.
- Ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.
- "Please let me know if there's anything I can assist with" is enough to let the person feel comfortable.
- Keep your mind and eyes focused on the task or conversation at hand.
- Smile - smiling bonds people. A smile can be heard, seen and felt.

Workplace challenges that deaf people face

- Language barriers - sign language is invariably their first language; English languages come second.
- Misunderstandings about what is expected or is meant.

- Isolation and being forgotten.
- Being unnecessarily excluded from meetings and other gatherings.
- Being given tasks that nobody else wants to do, not necessarily work they've been employed to do.
- Feeling inferior to other employees.

Deaf South Africans who inspire

- Braam Jordaan - filmmaker and visual artist, received 12 local and international awards for his animation 'The Rubbish Monster'.
- Paul Miller de Kock - fashion designer.
- Terrence Parker - swimmer who has excelled at the Olympics and Deaflympics.
- Wilma Druchen-Newhoudt - member of Parliament, reportedly the first deaf female in the world to be an elected official.
- Kobus Kellerman - the first deaf chartered accountant in SA.
- Darren Rajbal - a dancer who won the 2009 South Africa's Got Talent TV show.

Deaf training initiatives

- Contact the National Institute for the Deaf on 023 342 5555, the NID College at 023 347 3546 or visit www.deafnet.co.za
- The NID College hosts a Deaf Awareness Week in September every year but can be contacted for more information throughout the year.
- Contact the Deaf Federation of South Africa on 011 482 1610 or see www.deafsa.co.za
- Contact WRSeta for training programmes for the deaf on www.wrssta.org.za or 012 676 9000.

