

THE DAYTONA BEACH NEWS-JOURNAL

HOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS BEACH / Coastal Edition

SATURDAY, MAY 8, 2021

News-Journalonline.com \$2



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AMAZING TEACHER



American Sign Language teacher Cody Holland Monday, May 3, 2021 at Mainland high. DAVID TUCKER/NEWS-JOURNAL

Mainland High teacher uses good humor to help students learn sign language

By Cassidy Alexander
Daytona Beach News-Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Amazing Teachers: About this series

» As part of an effort to honor the work of teachers in Volusia and Flagler counties, The News-Journal and All Aboard Storage are sharing stories of educators who have made an impact on students' lives with a different story each month.

» Go to news-journalonline.com to see more stories about inspiring teachers in Volusia and Flagler counties.

» To nominate a teacher, visit news-journalonline.com/contests.

His hands don't stop moving as they chat and start the class. As the American Sign Language teacher, he makes a point to sign as he's talking to his students. But it's his unfailing sense of humor that makes him one of The News-Journal's Amazing Teachers.

Kathleen Zurenko, a colleague of Holland's who nominated him, said he's never in a bad mood.

"Just chatting with him makes you feel comfortable and as if you are the only person who matters in that moment," she said. "He is a rare individual, indeed."

American Sign Language is the predominant sign language of deaf communities in the U.S., and Mainland High is one of several high schools in the district that offer it as a foreign language.

Holland didn't set out to be a teacher, and didn't learn ASL until college, when he saw a group of students communicating that way and became friends with them. He picked the language up, casually learning new words, and eventually became an interpreter. When he saw that there was an opening for

an ASL teacher, he applied and has been working at Mainland High for four years.

"I try to keep it fun in here," he said. "It doesn't have to be hard to learn."

During the coronavirus pandemic, it's been a bit harder to teach. Being the only ASL teacher at the school this year, Holland is still teaching a mix of in-person and remote students, so he has to remember to stay behind his

desk where the students tuning in through Microsoft Teams can see him. On top of that, the required face coverings make communicating via ASL, which relies heavily on facial expressions to communicate grammar, more difficult.

"I'm still here," he said. "I'm not complaining."

Much of Holland's class is project-based. Simpler projects are things like, describe your pet. More complex ones involve telling a children's story or signing a song. This

year, he asked his more advanced students what they want to learn — and now they're all working on "roasts," or short speeches making fun of Holland in creative (but appropriate) ways.

And it works. One of Holland's students was eager to tell him about a group of deaf patrons where she works.

"Some people came into my work the other day and they were checking out (and couldn't hear)," she gushed. "And I was like, 'Hold up! My time to shine.'"

For Holland, that's the goal. He wants his students to walk away from his class with an understanding and appreciation for the deaf community. And if they can have fun along the way, that's all the better.

As his next class filed in and settled down, Holland had a question for them:

"Did you hear the CEO of IKEA got elected to the Swedish parliament? ..."



American Sign Language teacher Cody Holland works with a student getting a hand shape correct at Mainland High School in Daytona Beach on Monday, May 3, 2021. DAVID TUCKER/NEWS-JOURNAL

As Cody Holland's students settle into their seats in his Mainland High School classroom, the teacher gets things started.

"I know it's Monday, but did everyone hear? The CEO of IKEA got elected to the Swedish Parliament," he said to wary stares. After a pause: "Yeah, he's assembling his cabinet now."

They can't see Holland's grin behind his mask, but he's clearly pleased with the joke.

"We knew that was coming," one student said, laughing.



American Sign Language teacher Cody Holland signs to his remote learning students while he's at Mainland High School in Daytona Beach on Monday, May 3, 2021. DAVID TUCKER/NEWS-JOURNAL

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