

## 2018 National Teacher of the Year Finalist



### **Amy T. Andersen**

2018 New Jersey Teacher of the Year

Ocean City High School  
Ocean City School District  
Ocean City, New Jersey

School Profile: Rural, School  
Choice District  
District Size: 2,128  
School Size: 1,231

Subject: American Sign Language  
Grade: 10-12

Years in Teaching: 21  
Years in Position: 13

## Candidate's Resume Information

### Education

School	Western Maryland College
Degree	Master of Science
Major	Education for the Deaf
Years Attended	1994-1996

School	Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
Degree	Bachelor of Music
Major	Flute Performance
Years Attended	1990-1994

### Certification

Certification	NJ Standard License : Teacher of American Sign Language
Year Obtained	2004

Certification	NJ Standard License : Teacher of the Deaf or Hard of Hearing: Sign Language Communication
Year Obtained	2004

Certification	NJ Standard License : Teacher of Students with Disabilities
Year Obtained	2004

Certification	National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, ID # 00587263 : Early Childhood through Young Adulthood/ Exceptional Needs Specialist
Year Obtained	2001

Certification	Massachusetts Professional License : Teacher of the Deaf/ Hard-of-Hearing
Year Obtained	1996

### Experience

Title	American Sign Language Teacher
Organization	Ocean City Public Schools
Years in Position	2004-2017



Title	Early Intervention Teacher of the Deaf
Organization	Shirley Eve's Developmental & Therapeutic Center
Years in Position	2007-2009; 2015-2017

Title	Teacher of Students with Disabilities / 3rd - 5th grade
Organization	Cape May County Schools for Special Services, Extended School Year Program
Years in Position	2005-2017

Title	Literacy Teacher of the Deaf, 6th-8th grade
Organization	Boston Public Schools, Horace Mann School for the Deaf
Years in Position	1999-2004

Title	Literacy Teacher of the Deaf, 3rd-5th grade
Organization	The Learning Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children, Framingham, MA
Years in Position	1996-1999

#### Leadership

Position	NJ Seal of Biliteracy / High School Coordinator and Pilot program facilitator
Organization	Ocean City High School
Years in Position	2014-2017

Position	American Sign Language Teachers Association, ASL Honors Society School Sponsor
Organization	Ocean City High School
Years in Position	2008-2017

Position	OCHS American Sign Language Performers Club Director/ Deaf Community liaison
Organization	Ocean City High School
Years in Position	2014-2017

Position	National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, District Support Group Facilitator
Organization	Boston Public Schools
Years in Position	2002-2003



Position	Massachusetts Department of Education Fellowship Team, Training Specialist, Curriculum advisor for Deaf students and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System
Organization	Massachusetts Department of Education
Years in Position	1998-2003

#### Awards and Other Recognitions

Award/Recognition	National Liberty Museum Teacher as Hero : Exceptional Teacher Award
Year Received	2017

Award/Recognition	NJ School Board Association School Leader "Head of the Class" feature Nov/Dec issue
Year Received	2017

Award/Recognition	NJTV Classroom Close-Up NJ Feature segment, ASL Takes a Stand
Year Received	2015

Award/Recognition	NJ Association of the Deaf : Excellence in Community Award
Year Received	2014

Award/Recognition	Massachusetts Department of Education Master Teacher
Year Received	2002-2004

#### **Candidate's Professional Biography**

Amy T. Andersen believes that a nurturing classroom fosters academic achievement.

Amy started her career in Boston as a teacher of the deaf for eight years and she promoted strength in diversity. She celebrated students' differences by organizing field trips to various schools in Boston where her students presented to hearing children about American Sign Language (ASL) and deaf culture. In 2004, Amy moved to New Jersey and began the American Sign Language program at Ocean City High School with 42 hearing students. Enrollment jumped to 138 students and today, she teaches ASL 1, ASL 2 and ASL 3 Honors. In 2015, her program was highlighted on an Emmy-award winning program when her students' ASL anti-bullying video went viral.

Amy, a National Board Certified Teacher, takes students beyond the classroom by arranging paint nights with world-renowned deaf artists and signing opportunities with the National Association of the Deaf. She reinforces that every voice has value and it's our human right to communicate. Amy shows her students that diversity enriches all of our lives, and Ocean City is now known throughout the deaf community as a "deaf-friendly" town in South Jersey. Her students discover that differences should be celebrated, which leads many of Amy's students to careers in deaf education or ASL interpreting. Her students have even interpreted for former First Lady Michelle Obama and Madonna.

### Candidate's Application Questions

Question	Answer
<p>Describe a lesson that defines you as a teacher. How did you engage all students in the learning and how did that learning influence your students? How are your beliefs about teaching demonstrated in this lesson?</p>	<p>"Ms. Andersen, it's Michael! Madi signed "elephant" today to another baby!" And there it was, evidence of the impact one deaf toddler had on a high school student, who thought HE was the one teaching her. Michael didn't consider himself "a natural with kids". But, during the ASL performance he had the entire audience spellbound, especially two-year-old, Madi. After the show, her mother, eyes still full with emotion, told me Michael definitely was the one she wanted to volunteer with Madi! I knew Michael would think he was the wrong choice, but my belief that students of all backgrounds and interests can achieve the unreachable is a defining element of my teaching. I also knew two students, 14 years apart in age, would teach each other lessons I never could replicate in a classroom. I believe students are inspired to learn when language and culture lessons connect to real-world scenarios. To ignite enthusiasm, I often introduce thought-provoking topics and share my experiences in the Deaf community, for example, as an early intervention specialist with deaf babies. Language equality is a topic about which I always have been passionate. The unit I teach about language acquisition engages my ASL 3 students with a high-interest topic, slightly above their language proficiency level. It challenges them to learn new content, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. The class usually is a diverse mix of students with different backgrounds, levels of support, and plans for the future. I know every student can succeed and that they each have their own unique strength. The unit addresses the "why" behind ASL, and shows students – through experience – "what" is possible when a deaf baby is given a visual language. Sometimes too, a student will discover her future, like Elizabeth, who applied to Boston University's Early Childhood/Deaf Education program this year. The day I begin, I can't wait to tell the class about the opportunity they all will have to volunteer with baby Madi, who goes to daycare two blocks from the high school. Madi's teachers don't know ASL, which is affecting her learning significantly. I</p>



	<p>remind students Madi is behind her peers not because she “can’t learn”, but because she has no access to a visual language. Jenna, who enjoyed ASL, wasn’t bursting with excitement like the others. I knew she just needed inspiration and her skills would catch-up with the rest of the class. Jenna wanted to be a teacher, so this project ignited a spark. She spent more time signing with friends and studying, and her ASL took off. Jenna told me it was because she was now part of giving this baby her “voice”, her human right to communicate, and she felt a responsibility to Madi to sign well. In class, I asked students to research early childhood ASL studies and stories about babies thriving with ASL. We all came back together to share our findings and as students signed, I informally assessed their ASL structure, identifying linguistic elements to incorporate in the lesson. I noticed weaknesses in comparisons, body shifting, and signing space. The culminating assignment would challenge students to sign narratives comparing the perspectives for and against ASL. With a range of instructional approaches including modeling, guided practice, peer evaluation and independent application, I showed students how to incorporate these skills naturally in their narratives. We used a student-generated rubric to guide the creation of the narratives. Over videophone, my colleague at the National Association for the Deaf, signed with students about the new legislation in NJ. She explained that new parents rarely are told about the benefits of visual language and this new legislation would hopefully change that. Finally, students recorded a conversation with a friend or family member about how language deprivation affects deaf babies. We watched each one, and together identified strengths and weaknesses. Students' verbal explanations enabled me to assess their understanding of visual language acquisition. Their signed ASL narratives allowed me to evaluate the lesson's targeted language skills. With deepened awareness and the necessary language tools, my hope is that students are prepared to have this discussion in the future, possibly offering hearing parents the avenue to giving their deaf child language. That year, seven students were inspired to major in an ASL-related field, and Madi’s ASL vocabulary included more than 200 signs. Some students found their passion while experiencing the joy of making a difference. Michael realized he truly had something valuable to offer children and every single student achieved excellence, including baby Madi.</p>
<p>Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in. What was your role, and how did this contribute to the</p>	<p>Students thrive in a nurturing environment where they receive unconditional acceptance. A series of events in 2014, showed me that our high school needed such an environment. Although Ryan didn’t have ASL his senior year, he and his friends came to my room for lunch because they felt “comfortable to be themselves without judgment” there. Some of the kids struggled, felt targeted, and needed a refuge. Then, Ryan stopped coming to school, fell behind, and wasn’t going to</p>



<p>overall school culture?</p>	<p>graduate. I suggested to his case manager and his mother that he come to my room during my free period to catch-up on his work. He loved being in our annual ASL Show, so I said if his attendance and grades improved, he could have a solo in the show. I knew there were more students like Ryan who needed a “safe” learning environment. I discovered Stand for the Silent (SFTS), a national anti-bullying organization led by Kirk and Laura Smalley, whose 11-year-old son committed suicide after being bullied. My students and I were so moved by their courage, we partnered with SFTS to start a school-wide anti-bullying campaign. Collaborating with administrators, parents, teachers, and local deaf elementary students, we planned two community awareness events. We gave out SFTS wrist bands, t-shirts and pencils. Hundreds of students signed pledge cards. The air already felt lighter. Proceeds from our 2015 show, “ASL Takes a Stand” enabled me to bring Kirk to Ocean City. I invited every school in the county. It was the kind of presentation that cannot be described, only experienced. I remember driving home afterwards and getting calls from grateful parents. I had students telling me it changed how they looked at others. Anna, an ASL 2 student, created an ASL video as a gift for the Smalleys based on SFTS' signature song “Hey Bully” by Morgan Frazier. Kirk was overwhelmed by the video and shared it everywhere! Deaf Professional Artists Network featured it on its website. On Youtube, it has received close to 40,000 views. The video continues to generate awareness nationwide for ASL, as well as for every child's right to a safe learning environment. A month later we presented “ASL Takes a Stand” to a packed auditorium with a powerful performance about courage and embracing differences. The show was a collaboration with the Deaf Community, alumni, parent boosters, deaf elementary children, and...Ryan. I never will forget Ryan signing with a confidence I hadn't seen in the three years he was my student, and I saw that confidence grow as he received his diploma at graduation. I'm not sure if Ryan realizes how he influenced the start of a transformation in our high school, or how he influenced me to advocate for that change. Today, our "Wellness Center" provides a “safe place” for students to talk. Our high school always will be a work in progress as new students enter every year, but we strive to be a place where every student feels accepted and “comfortable without judgment.”</p>
<p>How do you ensure that your students are connected to the world around them? Describe</p>	<p>I begin with two goals for my ASL students each year: to understand that every individual has the indisputable right to communicate; and every voice has value, whether spoken or signed. As we learn about the interconnectivity of language and culture, I want students to understand we are stronger because of our differences, not in spite of them. I could say this all year, but for students to truly internalize the concept, I need to transcend the four walls of the classroom and help</p>



<p>the ways in which you do this.</p>	<p>them experience language and culture in various authentic situations. Collaboration with our Deaf Community creates dynamic, authentic learning opportunities. Once a month, our Deaf Community, students, and parents of deaf children, sign and get to know each other at Starbucks ASL Chats. Students become immersed in our Deaf Community naturally, gaining lifelong mentors. I have developed even more opportunities for students to interact with the Deaf Community by inviting world-renowned deaf artists to present painting parties, coordinating silent dinners with parents, welcoming diverse panelists to demonstrate the range in deafness, and coordinating videophone connections. Using our videophone, students have interacted with a deaf survivor of the 9/11 attack, the Deaf Studies Director at Boston University, and a cyclist from the 2013 Deaflympics. Deaf mentors provide practice sessions to prepare students for conversations with a variety of signers . Every year, Deaf chaperones join our Gallaudet University field trips where students, now the minority, are immersed on a campus rich with ASL and Deaf culture. Teaching is an opportunity to inspire, and ignite students’ passion for ASL, although my responsibility doesn’t end there. I encourage every child to build a future they will love living. I truly am proud of students like Megan, who interpreted for Michelle Obama, and Ashlyn, among the 5% of hearing applicants accepted to Gallaudet University. I succeed when students feel safe to be themselves, appreciate diversity in the classroom, and develop life-long empathy. Recently, some of my students volunteered at the "ASL Connect " event in Trenton, where they organized t-shirt sales, games, and ASL songs. After school, students sign with a local deaf toddler, witnessing the impact of the gift of visual language. Annually, current students, alumni, the Deaf Community and I collaborate on an original show to promote deaf awareness. Funds raised support student scholarships and national deaf charities that promote language equality. ASL students perform with deaf coaches and deaf children and learn, not because I teach them, but because they experience it. More than 100 deaf audience members from surrounding states attend this show year-after-year, helping students realize the value they bring. Nearly 150 students learn ASL every year, transforming Ocean City into a “deaf-friendly town”, where people in restaurants, shops, and on the boardwalk, sign with deaf visitors, making an accessible environment. Because nothing thrives in isolation, I facilitate meaningful connections between students and the world around them. In collaboration with students, parents, colleagues and the community, I empower leaders, expand perspectives, and maximize learning for all.</p>
<p>What do you consider to be a major public</p>	<p>I believe the most fundamental of human rights is language: the ability to express yourself and know your voice has value. Hearing children with language-rich home environments acquire language naturally,</p>



<p>education issue today? Describe why this is important to you, and how you are addressing this from your classroom.</p>	<p>because parents communicate in the same mode as their babies – a spoken language that is 100% accessible. Although a visual language, such as American Sign Language, is acquired easily by deaf babies, 90% have hearing parents who probably don't know ASL so the children may not have access to a language they can acquire naturally. With the passage of EHDI (Early Hearing Detection Identification), parents know early-on of their child's hearing issues. But pediatricians often believe deafness needs to be "fixed", and early intervention typically focuses on auditory, verbal remediation. Deaf children are expected to learn spoken English by deciphering words on the lips, in the hopes the child will one day be "normal". Without language, deaf babies not only struggle to achieve fluency in any language, but fall behind academically. Language deprivation is becoming a major issue in education. The majority of deaf children never pass a third- or fourth-grade reading level. Just 6% of deaf students scored "proficient" on the state English test; 51% scored at "far below basic", the lowest level of performance. Current solutions are remedial, rather than proactive. Deaf children often are diagnosed with a non-organic, preventable learning disability: the result of language deprivation. As a teacher, my responsibility is to advocate for all children. As a teacher of the deaf, I have seen what happens when children do not have a strong language foundation. For the past year, I have worked with and advocated for a deaf baby whom I believed was becoming increasingly isolated, because he had very little language. At 18 months, his hearing twin was reaching every linguistic milestone...alone. Spending 10 hours a day at daycare, in a room with only spoken English, the deaf twin was in an environment without language. I knew this could change. I shared the research of cognitive neuroscientist, Dr. Lauren-Ann Petitto, with this baby's mother. She learned the brain does not discriminate when it comes to language – signed or spoken. It is searching for patterns, primed to create meaning from language. This baby needed to be in a language-rich environment, exposed to an accessible visual language with a native user of American Sign Language. With persistence and determination, we convinced New Jersey to pioneer a new approach. Cole is now the first baby in NJ with a Deaf para-professional with whom he interacts, five hours a day, five days a week. His language has exploded. He signs about his naughty brother, or about a boardwalk ride that looks scary. He sometimes talks in his sleep...with his hands. At age two, his language equals, or is beyond that of his hearing twin, who also now signs, as do most of the other babies in Cole's class. The possibilities for Cole now are limitless, because he was given the gifts of love, language and voice.</p>
<p>As the 2017 National Teacher</p>	<p>Teaching is one of the greatest honors of my life. I remember during student teaching realizing "I get to do this for the rest of my life!" But</p>

of the Year, you serve as a spokesperson and representative for teachers and students. What is your message? What will you communicate to your profession and to the general public?

with this honor there is great responsibility. As teachers, we show our students those ideas we believe have value every day. My message to the students is to make strength of character their priority. I believe in empowering children with the indisputable guarantee of having the right to their voice, no matter how different – spoken or signed. Each person has a right to communicate. We must be an example for our students – show them through action – that every voice has value. We are stronger because of our differences. My American Sign Language (ASL) students learn about the historic oppression of the Deaf community. We discuss diversity, empathy, and understanding. The discussion explores shifting the perspective of Deafness as a disability, to recognizing that the Deaf community has a rich culture of art, literature, theater, shared history, shared language, and a set of ideals. As we discuss the need to change the view about the Deaf community, I encourage students to apply the same principle to everyone, including themselves. Often, teens struggle with discovering and embracing themselves – finding and accepting their own value. I believe we should leverage what we teach to make a commitment to educate the whole child. Our students are so much more than what we see in a classroom. Each is more than a math whiz, a talented writer, or an exceptional signer. They have lives, interests, and perspectives that shape them, and as teachers, we need to be cognizant of these factors. Recently, an ASL 2 student stayed after school to discuss college and his future. As a gay teen, “feeling safe” was a major factor for him as he considered college applications. He told me he had searched for the five most dangerous states for LGBTQ individuals, but only could find lists of hate crimes from all over the country. And then this 16 year-old said, “I realized why I couldn’t find the Top Five Most Dangerous States. All 50 states are places where there are people who will hate me because of who I am... there is nowhere to go.” This sense of hopelessness is hard to hear from a 16-year-old child, and yet, every day we expect him to learn, excel academically, and maintain emotional stability in a potentially hostile environment. His story is not isolated, nor is it specific to the LGBTQ community. The environment in our classrooms, our schools, and our country, has a direct impact on student achievement and future success. When I stand before my ASL students, I know some will do great things in and with the Deaf community. I also know they all won’t fall in love with ASL, like I did. But, I feel the responsibility of ensuring that every single one of my students IS going to contribute to society, in one way or another. They will influence those around them. What lessons will they take from their time with me? What lessons will I glean from them? My students are completing college degrees, getting jobs as interpreters, speech pathologists and teachers all over the country. About 65% of my students test right into ASL 3 college-level classes after



	<p>graduation. More than 85% have achieved the Seal of Biliteracy in the past three years -- passing the same sign language exam teachers of the deaf are given to earn state certification. Michael, who graduated last June, told me that because he tested into ASL 5, the director of his interpreting program said he could complete his degree in three years instead of four. My students are learning and excelling in American Sign Language, and for that I am exceedingly proud. But, I am even more proud – grateful – that these students are evolving into exceptional human beings. Year-after-year, my students inspire me to be better, to give more, and to guide them to higher levels of success. I have a year, sometimes two or three, to give my students a place where everyone is welcomed and differences of diversity are celebrated as enriching. I believe this destination can be universal. I use ASL and Deaf Culture as vehicles to take students there, but it can be any classroom, any situation. We are teaching and building character. I am proud that teaching is part of me, who I am, who I strive to be.</p>
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### **Candidate's Supporting Evidence**

[Recommendation Letter 1](#)

[Recommendation Letter 2](#)

[Recommendation Letter 3](#)

