

# Deaf child receives first Communion after first full ASL preparation

BY NICHOLE GOLDEN

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FORT OGLETHORPE—Alex Mullican cannot hear the music at Mass or the words of the priest, yet he feels at home at his parish, St. Gerard Majella Church in Fort Oglethorpe.

A third-grade student at the Georgia School for the Deaf, in Cave Spring, Alex celebrated his first holy Communion at St. Gerard Majella May 17. He is the first child to be assisted through the entire sacramental preparation for first Communion by the archdiocesan Office of Deaf Services.

“He loves going to church,” said Alex’s mother, Christine.

Adopted from China in 2013, Alex’s hearing loss is in the range of severe to profound.

Christine Mullican, a middle school special education teacher for Dalton City Schools, said tests indicate that her 8-year-old son has likely been deaf since birth.

“There’s really no history on him,” she said of his medical background.

At the orphanage, Alex would motion or point to communicate.

“He had no language,” said Mullican. “He’s really come a long way.”

Although Alex has begun to say a few words vocally such as “OK,” “yes” or “no,” American

Sign Language has become the language that he responds to and that he uses to express himself.

When the school tested him after being with his adoptive family for a year, his ASL language expressively was at the level of a 5-year-old. Receptively, it was the age of a 7-year-old. By wearing hearing aids, Alex can hear occasional sounds such as a passing motorcycle or the hum of cicadas.

Adoption had long been a dream of Mullican and her late husband, Joel.

“We were foster parents in the county. We were interested in adopting,” she said.

As their daughter Jordan, now 22, grew older, Mullican decided if they continued to wait on adopting it would be too late.

“This is it. We’re getting too old,” she recalled thinking. “I just couldn’t let it go.”

The family learned about their future son through an advocacy group online.

“I had seen Alex’s picture. He went from one agency to another,” said Mullican.

She was surprised that no one had stepped forward to adopt the boy.

“This is our little guy. Man, he’s an awesome kid,” she said.

Four months before the Mullicans were set to travel to China to bring Alex home, Joel died of a pulmonary embolism.



American Sign Language interpreter Cheryl Puckett, standing at left, interprets the words of Father Bill Williams, pastor of St. Gerard Majella Church, as he speaks to the first communicants. Puckett interpreted all Masses and formation classes for Alex Mullican, 8, for more than eight months.

The parishioners of St. Gerard Majella provided comfort to Mullican and have been very welcoming to Alex.

“It’s a smaller parish,” said Mullican of the family-like environment.

In preparing for Alex’s arrival, Mullican took an ASL class. She had never had a deaf student in any of her special education classes.

“We’ve had a lot of prep time. We’ve really stepped it up,” she said of learning and using ASL. “We do well day to day.”

Preparing to receive first holy Communion provided a unique challenge.

Mullican has long volunteered for the parish’s religious educa-

tion program.

“It’s been important. I taught Sunday School since we started there,” she said.

Mullican was teaching a third-grade class when Alex first came home, and he would tag along with her.

After that experience, Mullican and parish religious education director, Teri Hughes, realized that they would need a tailored approach to Alex’s sacramental preparation.

Hughes spoke with the pastor, Father Bill Williams, who, in turn, contacted the archdiocesan Disabilities Ministry.

The Office of Deaf Services is part of the Disabilities Ministry and is led by Kathy Daykin, coor-

dinator of deaf services.

“It was beyond what I was even expecting,” said Mullican of the response.

### ‘Perfect for this role’

Daykin used her contacts to locate an ASL interpreter to assist the family with the process. Interpreter Cheryl Puckett, also a teacher, became Alex’s interpreter.

“It was divine intervention,” said Daykin about finding Puckett.

Daykin explained that religious interpreters have to have a unique skill set, not just the ability to use sign language conversationally.

Puckett has the highest level of certification for interpreters other than for legal or judicial interpretation.


“She possesses other qualities that make her perfect for this role. It’s a lot of preparation for this role,” said Daykin. “She was already in education.”

Mullican said Puckett was patient with Alex, who, like many youngsters, can be distracted in Mass or in a classroom setting.

“She interpreted Mass and all of the classes. She’s just been so great,” said Mullican. “She takes

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Alex Mullican, a third-grade student at the Georgia School for the Deaf, celebrated his first holy Communion in May at St. Gerard Majella Church in Fort Oglethorpe. The archdiocese's Office of Deaf Services assisted the family throughout the preparation process.

used so beautifully by God," said Daykin.

A second family recently contacted the office for sacramental preparation for their child, Daykin said.

In most cases, she added, parents are not aware they can ask for help with deaf children for sacramental assistance. Pastors and directors of religious education are sometimes not fully aware of what the Office of Deaf Services offers. Parents have been "making do," she said.

Daykin said parishes with active deaf ministries, including ASL interpretation at some Masses, include Transfiguration in Marietta, Good Shepherd in Cumming, St. John Neumann in Lilburn, and Prince of Peace in Flowery Branch. Good Samaritan Church in Ellijay has recently started providing interpreted Masses. A few other parishes offer services upon request.

It was surprising to Mullican that Alex was the first child to use the services through the entire preparation process. Mullican lives in Ringgold and knows of a Protestant church there with a large deaf community.

The parishioners and Father Williams have included Alex in the life of the church with the priest making sure to emphasize that Alex will be part of the altar server contingent.

Alex is also progressing well in other areas and, like Mullican's late husband, is very interested in technology. He takes things apart just to put them back together again.

"He loves to ride his bike. He

loves to build things," said Mullican. "He's so smart."

She wants to be sure that all are aware of the services provided for deaf adults, teens and children by the archdiocese.

"I just want people to know," said Mullican.

To learn more about the Office of Deaf Services, contact Coordinator Kathy Daykin at [kdaykin@archatl.com](mailto:kdaykin@archatl.com) or 404-920-7683.

*Instruction in ASL for deacons, seminarians and priests can be individually arranged. ASL-trained interpreters are always needed for various programs. Training in Religious American Sign Language is available. If interested in serving in this special ministry, contact Daykin.*

it very seriously."

Puckett worked for eight months with Alex. When she was unavailable, Daykin would arrange for a substitute interpreter.

Daykin calls Alex "a bright soul" and said that witnessing this process has been amazing. In her four years of working in this ministry, she knows of only one other family that utilized the office's services of an interpreter for a young child, and that was for first reconciliation. They

have assisted several deaf teens in confirmation preparation.

"People just don't know what to do. We can help with that," emphasized Daykin.

She believes Disabilities Ministry Director Maggie Rousseau has made great strides in raising awareness about deaf services. Rousseau makes presentations at deanery meetings and directly works with parishes to spread the word about services available.

"Maggie Rousseau has been



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