



understanding grows as doubter turns into fan

By Kristi L. Mortensen

Kristi L. Mortensen was born and raised in Utah. She holds a B.A. in sociology from the University of Utah, an M.A. in educational counseling from the University of Phoenix, and is currently working on a Ph.D. in general counseling with Capella University. Mortensen plans to open a private counseling practice in 2006. She has been the Academic Bowl coach for the Utah Schools for the Deaf team for the past three years.



Right: Gallaudet University president I. King Jordan, top right, and provost Jane K. Fernandes, second from top left, join the Utah team.

When we were asked about our participation in the Western Regional Academic Bowl, the first thought that came to my mind was, “It will not work.” I didn’t question the value of the Academic Bowl, but the deaf educational system in Utah is unique, and the logistics of transportation are very difficult.

In our state, the headquarters of the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind (USDB) is nestled in north Ogden, where beautiful mountains crested with snow serve as a stunning backdrop. The building serves mainly as administrative offices. There are also a few classes for students that are blind, deaf-blind, deaf, and deaf with multi-handicaps. Most of the students, however, are mainstreamed in public schools with special education teachers in self-contained classrooms. They are spread all over the state in what we call districts.

There are four program directors, each of whom serves a part of Utah. Program directors are responsible for checking that deaf and hard of hearing students are placed in the right program—either full time or part time in self-contained classrooms in the school where



Photo courtesy of Kristi L. Mortensen



the self-contained classroom is located. If the students enter full-time mainstream programming, they transfer to their neighborhood school and are no longer under USDB's supervision.

I agreed, but I was terrified. I kept thinking, "How in the world could I solve the logistics of transportation?" I approached Teresa Kunde, a USDB teacher at Skyline High School in Salt Lake City. To my amazement, Teresa acted as if a car battery had been jumpstarted inside her.

We worked hard together to set up an Academic Bowl team, starting with tryouts for students who wanted to participate. We had to hurry because the deadline was approaching for submitting the application. After the selection of students, the application was completed, submitted, and accepted.

Practices started—and that was the difficult part. We learned that we had two students in Orem, about a 35- to 45-minute drive on a very good day. Three students lived in the Salt Lake City area. We decided that our practices would be held on Saturday mornings at the Robert G. Sanderson Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. We were grateful to its director for allowing us to use a room for practices every Saturday morning.

We found Nancy Kelley, a USDB teacher at Mountain View High School in Orem, who was willing to provide roundtrip transportation for the two students from Orem. Nancy came with us to our first Western Regional Academic Bowl competition in Riverside, California, in 2004. All of us—and all of our students—found the experience extremely rewarding.

Even more rewarding was the experience the following year when the Western Regional Academic Bowl came to Salt Lake City. We are grateful to the Utah Association for the Deaf for hosting the competition with the capable assistance of the Sanderson Community Center and USDB. We had Leah Voorhies, a USDB psychologist,

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and Jorie Hill, a specialist at the Sanderson Community Center, work very closely with Utah Association for the Deaf president Ron Nelson. Ron worked very hard to build and train a pool of local deaf volunteers. Pam thought this collaboration was neat because it is a goal of the National Academic Bowl that students get the best of both worlds—having opportunities to interact with people from schools, such as teachers, staff, and administrators, and from deaf community organizations, such as the Utah Association for the Deaf.

From my perspective as a coach, our students did a very good job. I was extremely busy preparing my team, but I saw how hard the volunteers and host committees worked to put everything together. We had the competition at the Sanderson Community Center. On Friday evening, the Utah Association for the Deaf provided a fun-filled outing at a local mini-amusement park inside a building where the kids really ran out their energy with miniature golf, a train ride, carousel rides, bumper cars, video games, and a light-filled roller skating rink. These organizations reminded Pam and me that they support the Utah Academic Bowl team and want to ensure it will continue for a very long time.

As the 10th year of the Academic Bowl gets underway, I consider it a great honor that we, the Utah team, are part of the competition. The response of parents reminds me how important our work is. Wrote one parent: "Thank you so much for allowing my daughter to take part in the Academic Bowl team. In the past, I have watched her struggle with schoolwork. When she joined the team, her grades improved and her self-esteem has improved. Thank you for making the Academic Bowl team in Utah possible." Another parent expressed herself through e-mail: "Please do not let my child quit the Academic Bowl team. This is the best thing for my child and I have watched my child's mental and emotional well-being improve greatly, and especially his social skills. Thank you."

As a coach, I have watched these students grow academically and socially. Young people who were formerly withdrawn have become more confident and assertive. I have watched them develop ideas on where they want to go after graduating from high school. My own understanding—and faith in the students and our ability to surmount our difficult logistics—has grown. As the future unfolds, I believe the Academic Bowl will continue to serve Utah deaf students well and motivate them to aim for an even higher educational standard.