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I just returned from an exciting ten days in Salt Lake City at the 16th Winter Deaflympics (Deaf Olympics). I coordinated the volunteer massage therapists for the Games. This was a perfect opportunity for me to utilize skills from both of my professions, as I have been a sign language interpreter for more than twenty years, and a massage therapist in private practice for almost three years.

The Deaflympics began as the International Silent Games in Paris in 1924 and has become the largest international sporting event behind the Olympics. The International Olympic Committee officially recognized the Deaflympics in 1955. Deaf people, because they could not hear starting guns, whistles, and the like, could not compete fairly with hearing people at the Olympics. And, because the IOC considers them able-bodied, they were not allowed to participate in the Paralympics. As a result, the Deaflympics were given official status.

Deaf athletes, by organizing their own Games, can also enjoy easy communication with each other, even if they come from other countries. Many countries' sign languages share some linguistic features with each other. Many foreign deaf people coming to the U.S. know at least some American Sign Language, so that plus the use of gestures, and the mere desire to communicate makes it rather easy to hold conversations with deaf people from all over the world! The Deaflympics is one way international friendships begin and a great way to strengthen one's sense of pride in Deaf culture.

Salt Lake City, the location of the 2002 Winter Olympics, has the infrastructure in place to easily accommodate hundreds of participants, volunteers, and fans. The Games were held from February 1-10, involved 345 athletes from fifteen countries, and included competitions in hockey, snowboarding, downhill skiing, cross-country skiing and demonstration games in curling. Several athletes came from Southern California.

I wondered how accommodations would be made for the athletes if they couldn't hear referees whistles, for example. It turns out there were simple changes made to make sounds "visual". For example, at the hockey games, the refs' whistles were rigged to small strobe lights strung around the rink on the outside of the boards. And skiers would see a flag waving instead of listen for a starting gun.

I became involved with the Games because I wanted to donate my skills as a massage therapist and felt it was a perfect place for me because of my signing skills. I contacted the Organizing Committee and assumed I would be joining a group of therapists already in place. It turned out that the Deaflympics had never offered massage to its athletes at any previous Games! They were happy to have me on board and handed me the reins. I had some help from two local therapists. We offered free 15-minute massages to anyone who wanted. The athletes

had top priority, followed by those with Games credentials (interpreters, Games' media personnel, coaches, etc). Last priority, but equally welcome, were families and fans of whom we asked a small donation. Our conference room in the hotel was a popular spot each evening! Many eagerly signed up for massage and several came back repeatedly. I was really happy we were able to help so many athletes relieve their aches from days of grueling practice runs and competitions. Even the event staff had tight necks and shoulders from working very long hours!

I was surprised to see so many people from CSUN, too! Some work there currently and some were my former students who have graduated and are living all over the U.S. Lawrence Fleischer, the head of the Deaf Studies department at CSUN was there and gave a speech at the opening ceremony because he is the president of the US Deaf Sports Foundation. Mel Carter, a former professor in the department, was the emcee for the opening ceremony. Gary Sanderson, former acting director of the National Center on Deafness manned a booth at the Deaf Expo. Everywhere I went, even at the trolley stops, I bumped into my former students who had flown in just to offer their support to friends who were competing. It was great catching up with each of them.

So, how did the United States fare when the Games ended? We came in second in the number of total medals collected, just behind Russia. In my eyes, though, we were the winners in putting together a major international event that was well organized and well attended and showed support for talented young athletes who will go far in all of their endeavors!