

Barbara Kannapell, champion of deaf people and ASL, dies at 83

By [Emily Langer](#)

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Barbara Kannapell was born deaf and grew up in the 1930s and 1940s in a vibrant deaf community in Louisville. Guided by her parents and several aunts and uncles who were deaf, she learned American Sign Language and flourished.

Even in the warmth of that environment, she was not spared the cruelties of audism, a prejudiced view of deaf people that is expressed in ways subtle and overt. A school principal once slapped her face because she could not correctly pronounce the words “United States.” Adhering to oral method of instruction, which requires deaf students to learn to read lips and speak, a teacher struck the children’s hands with a ruler if she caught them using sign language.

Such experiences fueled Dr. Kannapell’s advocacy for the rights of deaf people, a cause to which she devoted her entire adult life as a linguist, educator and activist. Dr. Kannapell was 83 when she died on Aug. 11 at a hospital in Washington. The cause was complications from hip surgery, said her spouse, Mary Eileen Paul.

For years, Dr. Kannapell taught courses in ASL, deaf studies and deaf culture at places including Gallaudet University, an internationally known institution in Washington that caters specifically to students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

As a consultant, she led workshops on those and related topics across the United States and around the world, challenging the long-prevailing notion that deafness is a deficit to be overcome. Trained in sociolinguistics, she promoted the view that ASL is a language as deserving of recognition as any other, and that people who communicate in ASL as well as in English should be regarded as bilingual.

“Once I learned that ASL is my native language,” Dr. Kannapell told [The Washington Post](#) in 1988, “I developed a strong sense of identity as a deaf person and a more positive self-image.”

Dr. Kannapell’s activism coincided with other social movements that developed during her lifetime, including the movements for civil and gay rights. In 1972, she and Paul, both White, joined with Ann Wilson, the African American mother of a deaf child, to form Deafpride, a Washington-based organization that sought to advance the rights and opportunities of deaf people of all races.

Among its initiatives, Deafpride pursued efforts to improve the educational experience for deaf public school students and to increase hospital services for patients, especially expectant mothers, who are deaf.

In an interview, Paul said that the group directed special energy to organizing workshops where hearing parents of deaf children could meet deaf adults, thereby gaining a vision of the rich lives that awaited their sons and daughters.

“Dr. Barbara Kannapell was years, if not decades, ahead of her time in every way,” Roberta J. Cordano, the president of Gallaudet University, said in a statement. “She was a fierce leader who saw and valued the essence of our signing deaf community and who sought to ensure that it is inclusive of everyone.” The statement lauded her as “a strong advocate for the LGBTQIA+ Deaf community, and a strong ally and leader in our community for removing barriers for Black Deaf people.”

Barbara Marie Kannapell was born in Louisville on Sept. 14, 1937. Her father became a printer and worked as a newspaper linotype operator, a common profession among deaf people at that time, and her mother was a homemaker. Both were born deaf. Dr. Kannapell had one sister, who was hearing.

Dr. Kannapell grew up using ASL, an experience that informed her conviction, as she once told the Wichita Eagle, that “American Sign Language is the best language to teach deaf children, with English as a second language, because (ASL) is designed for the eyes, not the ears.”

Bowing to the desires of her grandmother, Dr. Kannapell’s parents first enrolled her in a school that employed the oral method. The family later moved to Indiana, where she attended the Indiana School for the Deaf.

Dr. Kannapell received a bachelor’s degree in deaf education from Gallaudet in 1961, a master’s degree in educational technology from Catholic University in 1970 and a PhD in sociolinguistics from Georgetown University in 1985. For her dissertation, later published as “Language Choice — Identity Choice,” she surveyed 200 Gallaudet students and found that 62 percent identified as bilingual, in ASL and English.

Dr. Kannapell worked at Gallaudet from the early 1960s through the late 1980s as a research assistant and linguistics specialist before continuing her career at the Community College of Baltimore County in Catonsville, Md. She retired in 2014.

Dr. Kannapell was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous and, by the time of her death, had marked 50 years of sobriety. She helped form an all-deaf AA group, arranged ASL interpreters for AA meetings and sought throughout her career as an activist to support deaf people struggling with addiction.

Paul, who is hearing, said that she and Dr. Kannapell met in about 1970 at Pier 9, a popular gay bar in Washington. The owners, according to a National Park Service [history of the site](#), “cleverly skirted the District’s strict liquor laws forbidding people to walk around with drinks by installing telephones at each of the tables lining the dance floors.”

Paul recalled that a friend of hers noticed Dr. Kannapell and her companions, who were also deaf, and tried to call them. They could not hear the phone and did not answer, but the two parties later met on the dance floor. Paul first communicated with Dr. Kannapell in writing, she said, and later learned ASL.

Together for half a century, they held a commitment ceremony in 1996 and were married in 2013, after same-sex marriage was legalized in the District. Paul was Dr. Kannapell's only immediate survivor.

In the later years of her life, Dr. Kannapell called on younger generations of activists to carry on her campaign for deaf children, and in particular for a culture of bilingualism that celebrates ASL.

"It is our language in every sense of the word," she once observed. "We create it, we keep it alive, and it keeps us and our traditions alive."

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