

# English is her second language; she's been signing since she was 1

By Jared Boyd

Updated: May 08, 2020 10:04 AM CT | Published: May 08, 2020 4:00 AM CT



**Sign language interpreter Brenda Cash (left) signs the words to the deaf and hard-of-hearing community as Memphis Chief Operating Officer Doug McGowen (right) speaks on Wednesday, May 6, 2020, during a COVID-19 task force briefing. (Mark Weber/Daily Memphian)**

## This is your **last free article.**

Subscribe to get unlimited access to high quality, local journalism.

conferences to sign the messages from health and government officials.

---

### Leaders weigh 'Back to Business' risks of reopening badly

---

Cash is a trusted resource to people whose link to information is uncertain.

That's because she didn't learn the language in order to translate it to speech. She learned it before she could speak.

"(My sister and I) learned to sign at the age of 1," said Cash, whose parents were both deaf.

"Sign language is my native language, because that was the main form of communication in my home. English is my secondary language, because that was spoken when I was at school or with family members and neighbors."

Cash grew up in several neighborhoods in Memphis, attending church, playing baseball and basketball, with American Sign Language always feeling like a normal part of her life.

She graduated from White Station High School and before attending the University of Tennessee at Martin and finding her first job as an interpreter, she realized the world wasn't always kind to people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

"When I started learning (signing) at an agency and I realized, 'Oh, this is frowned upon,' I didn't understand why people considered it as a disability, whereas my parents didn't at all," Cash said.

"That's why I love working for the agency that I do. Because they provide a lot of

This is your **last free article.**

Subscribe to get unlimited access to high quality, local journalism.



**Brenda Cash (left) signs as Shelby County Health Department Director Alisa Haushalter on Wednesday, May 6, 2020.** (Mark Weber/Daily Memphian)

Cash is the BridgesWEST staff interpreter and youth services coordinator. In that role, she's at the forefront of partnerships between the agency and the City of Memphis' youth programming, making her the go-to interpreter when public officials were looking for an interpreter for the COVID-19 Task Force broadcast.

In her 22-year career, Cash has signed at high-profile concerts, political rallies, the delivery of a child and even a court hearing in which a deaf child was able to return to a guardian who knew ASL. But her day-to-day work often includes accompanying clients to medical appointments and hospital visits.

## This is your **last free article.**

Subscribe to get unlimited access to high quality, local journalism.

“Interpreters like Brenda Cash — who is what we call a CODA (Child of Deaf Adult) because she has that knowledge and experience with her language — she knows exactly what we need. She’s just phenomenal. When I get a green interpreter, I get so worried that problems will stem from our communication. And that just causes a great deal of anxiety,” McGhee said.

This anxiety, for many, has become heightened by COVID-19, as health care providers increase reliance on video remote interpretation (or VRI), during the age of social distancing and isolation.

McGhee says there are several areas where VRI has created new problems.

“Usually the interpreters aren’t great. There are really bad connections with the Internet, so they constantly freeze up,” McGhee said.

“The thing is, the medical providers think the interpreter is doing a great job, but the meat of the matter is: they really don’t know. They don’t read sign language. They don’t know how good the interpreter is. They see the interpreter just moving their hands around and think, ‘Well, they are doing a great job.’ But really, that’s not fair access, from my experience.

“I feel like oftentimes the interpreter will misrepresent what I say and I think, ‘Wait a minute, that’s not what I was trying to say.’ I can tell because of the facial expressions or the questions the provider will ask after I say something. I realize, ‘Oh my God. I have a really bad interpreter.’ And I don’t want to die. ... So, it’s worth fighting for, for my family and for myself.”

---

[Houston High student honors healthcare workers with senior project](#)

This is your **last free article.**

Subscribe to get unlimited access to high quality, local journalism.

Martha saw Cash at her doctor's office and, "I was able to fully understand everything I needed to do. She was so clear. She did a nice job. I am just so comfortable with her and so at ease."

"Now, we see her on the news and we really enjoy it," Jerry said.

"It's crucial, because the captions are sometimes hard to read. So, when we see her up there, we understand what the plans are very clearly."

McGhee, along with Martha and Jerry Bryant, describe Cash's ability to connect with audiences who are deaf and hard of hearing as a level of fluency that typically isn't found in interpreters who learn ASL later in life.

Nancy Denning-Martin, president and CEO of Bridges for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, explains that Cash's engaging qualities don't just stop there.

"A hearing world sees someone like Brenda and becomes fascinated. Because ASL is so physical and is so interesting when you're watching a press conference," Denning-Martin said.

"But for people who know the language, they appreciate how skilled she is. Because not all interpreters are created equal. Not everyone who gets up to wave their hands around or knows their ABCs is interpreting. Brenda is taking in English and giving out a completely separate language with its own grammar, its own syntax, its own vocabulary - simultaneously."

Cash, a mother of two sons, one of whom is deaf, is regarded as an advocate as much as she is a communicator.

"Even though she's an interpreter and she does get paid for her job, she is doing it for

This is your **last free article.**

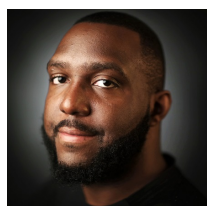
Subscribe to get unlimited access to high quality, local journalism.

Denning-Martin boils Cash's impact down to one word: "extraordinary."

"And I find what really makes her special is the intersection of confidence and compassion and humility that she has. I think it's a rare mix. To see it in someone who is serving this community, it's really beautiful," Denning-Martin said.

"Everything comes from her heart, and it's all very genuine. It's her life experience as a CODA, her experience as a mother of a deaf child, but this is really her community. And she's working to create access in what is her native language. I think she has a unique perspective and a unique heart for this community."

#### TOPICS

[COVID-19 TASK FORCE](#)[AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE](#)[BRENDA CASH](#)[CORONAVIRUS](#)

#### **Jared Boyd**

Jared Boyd is a general assignment reporter with The Daily Memphian who can be found covering just about anything people in the Mid-South might find interesting. His friends call him "Jay B.," and you can, too.

This is your **last free article.**

Subscribe to get unlimited access to high quality, local journalism.

This is your **last free article.**

Subscribe to get unlimited access to high quality, local journalism.

This is your **last free article.**

Subscribe to get unlimited access to high quality, local journalism.



This is your **last free article.**

Subscribe to get unlimited access to high quality, local journalism.