

Why ACcessibility Matters

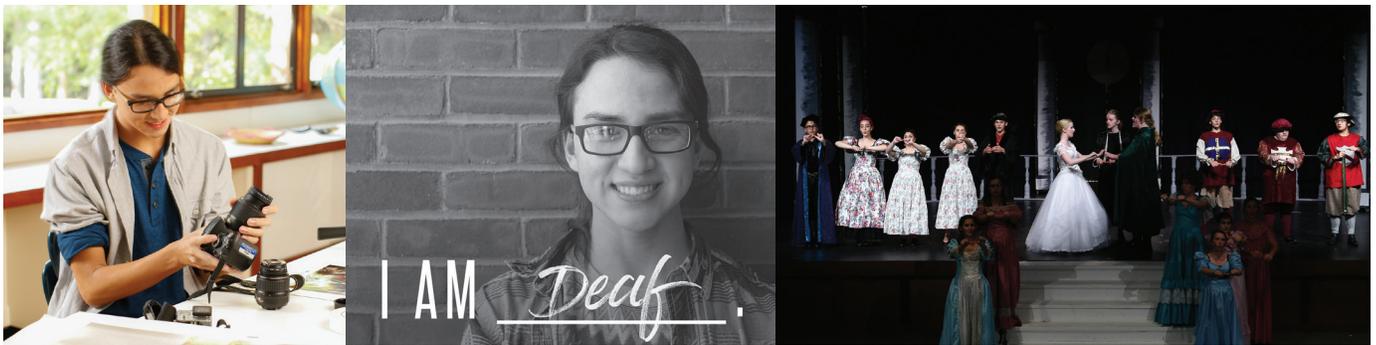
By Phelan Conheady '17

As my high school years are coming to a close, I can't help but to look back to when I first visited Allendale Columbia in 2013. While looking at new schools, most students consider whether or not they will fit in or if the classes are taught in a manner that suits them. Granted, while these were big factors in my decision to attend Allendale Columbia, I was thinking to myself, "OK, the hallways are carpeted. Most ceilings are tiled. The architecture has a lot of open spaces and the atmosphere was quiet and orderly. Oh, look, a visual fire alarm! Good. I won't die." You may be wondering why I had such weird criteria for looking at schools, but I was looking for a "deaf-friendly" place, and, unbeknownst to Allendale Columbia at the time, the campus is really a "deaf-friendly" place. The carpeted floors and tiled ceilings help reduce noises such as the ever-so-annoying click-clack sound

I vowed to devote some of my time at Allendale Columbia to making it a more accessible place for all.

Sophomore year, I spent time during what was previously called Collab Block, forming a proposal for the school to initiate several projects. My efforts put the need for accessibility—including the need for ramps and options for the many stairs on campus—on the table as an important topic. The day I saw construction being started on a lift in the Dining Commons, I jumped and screamed out of complete joy. I couldn't help but beam with pride in my school for taking initiative!

Another great point of pride I will carry with me from my high school experience at AC is participating in the musical. In my debut in *The Addams Family*, our theatre director



of high heels on a hard surface echoing into the classroom. Open spaces allow for a clear view of my interpreter, and a quiet and orderly atmosphere means that distracting noises can be kept at bay.

According to the last recorded census, 19% of the American population, or 56.7 million people, have some form of disability, and every day these people observe instances in their lives that hinder them from completely integrating with the greater population. Upon coming to AC as a hard of hearing teenager, I knew that statistics were stacked against my favor, but it was a challenge I was willing to face.

My first hurdle took place Freshman year when I joined the swim team. The combination of being without an interpreter at the time and being unable to wear my hearing aids or my glasses (which helps me read lips) made swimming a hassle. One time, I misheard some instructions and performed a drill incorrectly. After I finished my drill, my coaches called me over to reprimand me. After I explained that I couldn't hear the instructions, I was reprimanded again, and, with that,

sought out my signing abilities and used it to enhance a rather "ghoulish" show. Since then, I have found my new love for theatre, and we have incorporated sign language in every musical since. However, nothing could compare to our most recent November 2016 production of *Cinderella*, where the entire cast literally adopted a language that I call my own and signed numerous numbers in the show. Our *Cinderella* was an experience I will forever take with me wherever I go. I am so proud of and grateful that AC is a community willing to show how accessible theatre can be and how accessible a new approach to education can be for all students.

I am a firm believer in making an impact, a core value that AC has instilled in me in these past four years. For me, making a positive impact would mean that, one day in the future, a child would face one less obstacle in the pursuit of higher learning as a result of me breaking down barriers pertaining to disability; then all my trials and tribulations would have been worth it. That is why "ACcessibility," as I call it, is so important to me.