Defying the Odds

*Deaf student Demarcus Thomas is welding his way to success*

Demarcus Thomas isn’t your typical welding student. He can’t rely on a sense welders use in everyday welding: his hearing. Six months after he was born, Thomas lost his hearing. But despite the challenges of being deaf, he’s in his third semester of welding courses at SOWELA® Technical Community College in Lake Charles, La.

SOWELA’s faculty and staff have worked diligently to ensure Thomas gets the welding instruction he needs, including two interpreters who translate his instructors’ spoken words into American Sign Language (ASL). The interpreters work with Welding Instructor Jonathan Darbonne to make sure Thomas understands the welding process, even if that means using unconventional methods to communicate with him. Darbonne also developed unique ways to expand Thomas’ welding knowledge — Fig. 1.
One of those interpreters, Zoe Domingue, explained that working with Thomas has improved her knowledge of ASL — Fig. 2. She works closely with another ASL translator, Mary Mieberg, to ensure Thomas is never without a translator while learning at SOWELA.

“ASL is more of a visual language and, obviously, all the welding terms don’t translate perfectly,” said Domingue. “I’ve had to learn to understand the mechanics of a weld and explain and communicate things in unconventional ways, but the system we’ve implemented works.”

“SOWELA has a great welding program and very dedicated and skilled welding instructors,” stated SOWELA Chancellor Neil Aspinwall. “Having a deaf student enrolled in such a high-touch program has provided a challenge that, I am pleased to say, the welding faculty have embraced. They’ve worked very hard to create solutions to ensure Demarcus masters the necessary instructional skills that will enable him to become a proficient welder.”

An Unconventional Way of Learning

Though Thomas’ instructors and interpreters strive to make his learning process as seamless as possible, his journey hasn’t been perfect.

“The instructing process with Demarcus is always evolving because we’re always learning,” explained Darbonne. “The system we implemented took one and a half to two months to nail down, and we’re always having to come...
up with new descriptions to make sure Demarcus understands. Not all of the welding terms translate perfectly into American Sign Language."

The process involves first relaying the welding instructions and information to the interpreters. When the interpreters have a solid grasp of what Thomas is supposed to do, then they can properly communicate it to him in ASL. And even though Thomas relies on interpreters for his coursework, once he steps into the welding booth, he’s without interpreters (because of safety precautions) and relies solely on his instructors.

“Even though I’m alone in the welding booth, whenever I ask for help, Jonathan will help me and show me so I can learn,” said Thomas. “Sometimes Jonathan will put his hand over my hand to work together so I can feel the rhythm, which helps immensely.”

**Finding His Passion**

Thomas fell in love with the craft after taking a welding course while attending Barbe High School in Lake Charles — Fig. 3. Initially, he planned to take only one semester of welding courses at SOWELA, but thanks to the encouragement of his instructors and interpreters, he decided to complete the program. Thomas knows he can always ask questions and get the assistance he needs to complete his assignments — Fig. 4. He also has support from his family, especially his mother, Karen.

“My goal is to get the very best for him every day,” she said. “Working with the staff, faculty, and interpreters at SOWELA has been a dream come true. We all sat down and became a great team for Demarcus.”

Thomas has a robust life outside of school. He works as a pool attendant at L’Auberge Casino Resort Lake Charles and drives himself to and from school and work every day. He wants people to know that deaf people are just as capable as hearing people in everyday tasks and in the welding booth.

“It’s life,” he said. “Some days are hard; some days are easy. It just depends, but I’m committed to living a normal life and working toward my goal of finishing the welding program and graduating in 2023.”

That goal is important to his mother, too.

“I thought when he graduated high school that I would cry, but I didn’t,” she said. “I just never expected him to do all that he’s done. I’m his biggest cheerleader, and I’ll be very proud when he walks across that stage, but this time, I just might cry out of happiness.”

And after graduation?

“My goals are to get a house and hang out with my friends,” Thomas said. “But most importantly, I want to have a career in welding.”

Everyone on Thomas’ team believes he will achieve all his goals and succeed in welding.

“Demarcus is living proof that we all can do anything we set our minds to,” affirmed Darbonne. “I can’t wait to see what the future holds for him because it’s brighter than a welding torch.”

For more information about SOWELA’s welding program, visit sowela.edu/welding.