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NEWS RELEASE

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Covina-Valley Unified American Sign Language Teacher Breaks Down Barriers as Deaf Rock Climber

COVINA, CA – South Hills High School American Sign Language (ASL) teacher Sonya Wilson has always been determined to explore new opportunities and pursue her passions, despite the challenges posed by her Deafness. Wilson views being Deaf in the outdoors as an asset because it heightens her senses and connects her with her surroundings as she pursues her biggest passion: rock climbing.

Wilson's love for climbing was sparked after she took an outdoor class in her sophomore year at Azusa Pacific University. She became fascinated by the equipment and the excitement she felt when climbing. However, Wilson quickly realized how difficult it was to find people willing to climb with a Deaf climber.

Wilson's challenges inspired her creation of the ASL Climbing Network in 2012, a Facebook group intended for Deaf climbers and ASL signers that aims to cultivate a community of individuals who share a love for climbing and to organize meetups.

"I wanted to create a safe space where Deaf people could come together and find each other in climbing," Wilson said. "Sharing a mutual passion for the outdoors builds support, confidence, and community."

In 2019, the retailer and outdoor recreation services company REI featured Wilson's group in an article about Deaf climbers. The article caught the eye of a film producer and his team from Spruce Tone Films, who then approached Wilson about creating the film "[Elevated](#)," with Eddie Bauer as the primary sponsor. Following the worldwide debut of the movie in May 2022, Eddie Bauer and Mountain House invited Wilson to become their first Deaf ambassador.

"The filming process was incredible, and I learned so much from the production company, but they also learned a lot about the local Deaf community," Wilson said. "It was a great opportunity to raise awareness and encourage the outdoor industry to improve."

Wilson has taught ASL for more than 24 years. She is in her fourth year at South Hills High School, teaching Deaf and hearing students. Her lessons, however, go beyond ASL. She impacts her students through the stories of her many adventures and inspires them to get outside and explore the outdoors.

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Wilson said she believes barriers should be removed for the Deaf community to help increase accessibility and promote acceptance, including closed captioning all films and videos and providing ASL interpreters when requested.

“Removing barriers to create a more inclusive and accessible environment should be a priority for all industries. There is so much to learn from the Deaf community,” Wilson said. “Being a Deaf person is a gift and an asset. Deaf people are a wonderful, strong community with a beautiful visual language and a rich history and culture. Deaf people are equal to everyone else; we all just have different superpowers.”

“Elevated” was recently nominated for the “Best Documentary” and “People’s Choice” Webby awards. [Voting](#) closes on Thursday, April 20. Visit [@aslclimbingnetwork](#) on [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) to learn more about Sonya and her group.

“Ms. Wilson exemplifies exceptional teaching and is a true force of nature,” Superintendent Dr. Elizabeth Eminhizer said. “She brings her incredible life experiences and passions into the classroom, helping and encouraging our students to grow more every day.”

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

CVUSD_SONYA1: South Hills High School American Sign Language teacher Sonya Wilson continues to explore new opportunities and pursue her passions, despite the challenges posed by her Deafness. Wilson said she believes barriers should be removed for the Deaf community to help increase accessibility and promote acceptance.

CVUSD_SONYA2: Sonya Wilson views being Deaf in the outdoors as an asset, as it heightens her senses and connects her with her surroundings as she pursues her biggest passion: rock climbing. Wilson started the ASL Climbing Network in 2012, a Facebook group intended for Deaf climbers and ASL signers to create a community and organize meetups.

CVUSD_SONYA3: Sonya Wilson was featured in “Elevated,” a short film sponsored by Eddie Bauer, and was recently nominated for the “Best Documentary” and “People’s Choice” Webby awards. Both Eddie Bauer and Mountain House extended an invitation to Wilson to become their first Deaf ambassador.

Photos courtesy of Spruce Tone Films

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