

Butler Eagle

Deaf student earns degrees, honors

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BUTLER TWP — Photographer, graphic designer and, as of Wednesday, **Butler County Community College** graduate Justin Barnes should highlight the words “adaptive” and “multitasking” on his resume.

Like his fellow BC3 graduates, Barnes, 23, of Butler had to manage a class schedule, a social life and homework while earning his dual associate's degrees in graphic design and photography. He was one of just eight students, out of 522 BC3 Class of 2013 graduates, to earn two degrees, and graduated cum laude.



Justin Barnes, a deaf graduate of BC3, poses with his mother Nicole and father Michael outside of the Butler County Community College.
TYE CYPHER/SPECIAL TO THE EAGLE

But Barnes, who lost his hearing as a toddler, often completed those activities while looking from teachers to their class presentations, then to a sign-language interpreter and his own work, then back to the teacher again, as well as using notes, e-mails and text messages.

“It's difficult to focus on three different things at one time. You are trying to pick up what an instructor is saying, watch the PowerPoint, and pay attention to the interpreter,” Barnes said through an interpreter.

He also answered questions via e-mail while describing his journey to college graduation.

Born to Michael and Nicole Barnes, Justin Barnes was raised in Butler. He lost his hearing at age 2½ to complications associated with Branchio-Oto-Renal syndrome.

Hearing aids were of no help to Barnes, who attended the Midwestern Intermediate Unit 4 preschool hearing impaired program.

After receiving a Cochlear implant at age 5, Barnes attended Center Avenue Elementary School,

which had a hearing-impaired program and several other deaf children, from kindergarten through sixth grade.

“I was learning sign language and English at the same time. (And) I was getting speech therapy. Reading was a huge challenge for me. When the language/context/vocabulary got more difficult, I would need further explanation from my interpreter and then miss out on other content as the teacher moved on,” he said.

But Barnes persevered, and then after sixth grade, chose to attend the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, rather than go to a mainstream high school and rely on an interpreter.

“I wanted the opportunity to develop friendships with deaf peers and directly communicate with kids my age without an interpreter. I wanted to be able to participate fully in every aspect of school life and interact freely without language barriers,” he said.

After graduating from the School for the Deaf in 2008, Barnes attended the Rochester Institute of Technology, National Technical Institute for the Deaf. But after a semester there, he decided to move home and attend BC3.

“I was interested in graphic design and photography and BC3 has these programs. Also, I heard from family and friends that BC3 provides a great education. I was then able to (live) at home while earning my degree.

“BC3 has smaller classes, which is important to me so I have more time, if needed, to get help from my teachers,” Barnes said.

Any apprehension Barnes had about socialization was quickly answered by school staff and fellow students.

“When I first started at BC3, I remember sitting in the Cafe for lunch and one of my classmates walking in. Seeing me, she sat down and typed a message out on her cell phone, and we began communicating that way.

“I’ve had some wonderful teachers at BC3, too, including Mrs. (Nancy) Rose and Mr. (David) Ludwick,” he said.

“I had some great tutors, and BC3 provided interpreters for (tutoring and classes). They also provided me with note-takers ... Also, I got to know many BC3 staff who were all so helpful and friendly, including the staff at the Cafe and the bookstore. We developed our own way of communicating.”

Still, Barnes conceded that the move from the School for the Deaf to a school where, again, communication would be a challenge, was intimidating at first.

“I think some of the hearing students, who I became friends with later, were a little nervous, as well, as they weren't sure how to communicate with me.

“In elementary school, having any interpreter was fine, as you're young and the content of your conversations is light. But for seventh through twelfth grade, things are different ... if you want to share something personal with a friend, you don't always want to use an interpreter,” Barnes said.

“After high school, again I think things change as you get older. I have to think about my future and a job and the reality that I need to become independent in a hearing world.”

To that end, Barnes earned his associate's degrees.

“I'm a very visual person and graphic design and photography both interest me. I like to capture unique photos and wow people with them. I like to take photos so people have memories,” Barnes said.

“I was honored last semester to work on the Preston Park (in Butler Township) project in one of my classes. I created a PowerPoint presentation that was taken to Harrisburg and helped with Preston Park being placed on the National Register of Historic Places.”

Four of Barnes' photographs also were featured in the 2013 edition of FACETS, BC3's art and literary magazine.

“I really do love to take pictures of children and animals. I really like to be in an outdoor environment,” Barnes said, adding that he prefers to use tools like Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator to edit work.

The future holds a lot of options for a man of Barnes' talents, and he is considering several of them: He'd like to work as a freelance photographer, continue his education by earning a bachelor's degree, or perhaps, do mission work through his church, Harvest Baptist Church near Pittsburgh Mills, which has a deaf ministry.

“I love to help people. Also, I would like to travel to other states and countries to take photos and would love to do underwater photography.

“As a deaf person, these things will be challenging and will require research to find out how I will communicate with others if/when I do them,” Barnes said.