A siket mérnök jó mérnök

Rochesterben ezerértéssel hallgattott diák kap világszínvonalú képtestet

A városa a dolgozótól választ el, a siket-ség az emberi-kölyök mondja Jim, és ami
ek benn, nemcsak a szélső jár, hanem a keze is. Az Egyenlítő Akadémia és a világ
egyik legjelentősebb műszaki egyeteme, a Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT)
keneiben bővíti működő NTID vezetői és oktatási számára természetes, hogy egy-
szerre szolgáljának azokhoz, akik hallatok őket és azokhoz, akik nem. A National
technical institute for the Deaf – Siket-
Osztigók Műszaki Intézete – ezer-
evész hallgattott diákot készít fel ar-
a, hogy ne csak megtaláljak helyet az életben, de az a hely jó is egykori.

Az NTID diplomásait több mint kerekértésen azok választják, a végzettségügynek
egyszerűen munkát kap. Kelibarmádakat felügyeletes az üzleti alaposan működő
munkavégzésre, sokan az oktatásban (nem csupán a hallássérülésekkel) vagy
nyomott szervezetekben találhatók állást, csak nem minden tisztelet a szó-
vetési vagy a helyi kormányzat fogal-
kotaíja, sem. Nem elég, ha a siketek ugyanolyan jól képzett mérnökök vagy
állítót, mint halló társak. Nekkik még jobbaknak kell lenniük, hogy a társadal-
om „helyettesí” nekik a más területen õsszempárnak megválasztható választóknak –
magyarázza Jim, miközben a légképben lévő washingtoni magyar nagykövetet, 
Simonyi András a robotikai és automa-
tizálási laboratóriumából értesülni a di-
kép kéziszed Kelly-fogásának.

A nagykövet azt megjegyezte, hogy az NTID ől éve egy magyarországi projekt reáliségének segítségével nyújtotta a hallássér-
ülétek magyar államú iskoláiban tani-
tó tanárok számítógépes és internetes felkészülése. A Soros Alapítvány és az
Amerikai-Magyar Kereskedelmi Ka-
mará, az AmCham támogatását élvező
programot Rochesterben sikertelen tart-
ták számán, és a Magyarországon meg-
fordított pedagógusok és oktatósszerve-
zők dicséreltek az ott tapasztalt hozzájá-
szót. Azt mondják, hogy a siketeknek és
szintén a magyar mérnököknek és nyomor-
hogalók tekintik őket, de gondolják,
mi az a módszer, amely segít a siketeknek és
azoknak a hallatlanak.
The Deaf Engineer Is a Good Engineer

Twelve Hundred Hearing Impaired Students Receive World Class Training in Rochester

By Gábor Horváth

The blind may be cut off from things, but the deaf are separated from other people, says Jim, and when he talks his lips and hands move in unison. Leaders and Instructors of NTID are used to talking to those who can hear them and, at the same time, to those who cannot. This is the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, operating within the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) one of the most renowned universities of applied technologies in the United States of America, if not the world. Twelve hundred hearing impaired students are prepared here to face competitive life with an impressively high success ratio. Their goal is not just to face life but to assure it will be a life worth living.

Better than nine out of ten NTID graduates get immediate placement within their field of training. Two thirds of them are enticed on a competitive basis by free enterprise, many land jobs as educators (and not just for the deaf!) or join non-profit organizations. About one in ten deaf graduates ends up working for the (federal, state or local) government. It is not enough for deaf engineers or researchers to simply match the performance of their hearing peers. They have to be better, so society will favorably “overlook” their obvious handicaps in other aspects of life, elaborates Jim to András Simonyi, Hungary's Ambassador to the United States, while he escorts his visitor for the Laboratory of Robotics and Automation to the Digital Imaging classroom.

The ambassador is here because five years ago NTID was a helping partner in providing computer literacy and Internet training to participating teachers of Hungarian elementary schools for the deaf. Having enjoyed the support of the Soros Foundation and the American-Hungarian Chamber of Commerce (AmCham), the project is regarded in Rochester as a success. Instructors and project development team members with field experience in Hungary praised the participants' attitude. They cannot much praise anything else, considering the deaf students in Hungary do not even have a secondary school, never mind a college level institution like NTID. According to even the most optimistic statistic, a mere 15% of deaf students complete high school while the number of deaf college graduates are but a handful, each is known by name within the community.

Without a proper educational background, most hearing impaired young people start their allegedly useful adult lives drawing disability benefits. At best, they are offered low skill, low paying jobs. This virtually condemns a person to decades of social dependency, a far cry from the full life of a contributing, tax paying, self reliant citizen. Things were similarly dismal in the United States until the sixties, when Congress finally acted to create a legislative basis and funding to educate the handicapped. Today, the infrastructure is in place, not only in Rochester but also in the Capital and on the West Coast. Curriculum based institutions of higher learning for the deaf exist to face a problem that did not go away but at least became manageable.

According to Egon Tóth, Director of the Budapest School for the Deaf (BSD), we had two promising student candidates to continue their studies at NTID. Although both passed the entrance requirements, they were unable to get scholarships. With an RIT degree in their résumé, a few well placed deaf professionals could indeed break the ice of current exclusionary attitudes in Hungarian industry. The deaf engineer is a good engineer, says one of the professors. With an RIT degree, how could it be otherwise?! - comes the immediate follow up question.

Jim is Dr. James J. DeCaro, who wears several hats. Besides being an NTID professor, he's also Director of PEN-International, an organization with a worldwide mission to bring higher than secondary level education to the hearing impaired. Supported by The Nippon Foundation at 4.5 million dollars, NTID instructors are part of a coordinated deaf education effort in Japan, China, Russia, the Philippines, Croatia and the Czech Republic. They'd be happy to include Hungary if they only knew whom to educate.

So how do we resolve the issue? Social attitudes need to change so potential students are not viewed as impaired, capable of only manual tasks. If specially equipped elementary schools could emphasize teaching
of English (and/or German) to motivated students, it could open the road to American or European schools of higher education. This approach might be more efficient than to develop a costly domestic infrastructure to match NTID, considering only 0.1% of our population is known to be deaf or hard of hearing.

From live speech to sign language, every known communication method gets used at NTID, where the instructors tend to assimilate with the deaf. In addition, they have over a hundred full time sign language interpreters on duty, in itself a horrible expense. The 1200 strong student body receives special tutoring to the extent of 57 thousand hours per year. This is necessitated by the fact that the deaf and hard-of-hearing are often at a disadvantage not only when facing live speech but also with the written form, they tend to trail by 4-5 years their hearing counterparts. NTID has developed a computer program that automatically transposes vocal speech to written text form. Using this, for example, students can follow any lecture event in real time.

An additional attraction in the Rochester approach lies in its setting. NTID students do not exist in an isolated world of their own but are an organic part of RIT’s 15 thousand (mostly hearing) student population. They live, play and party together. This is extremely important, considering the deaf students’ ultimate need is to find individually tested ways to effectively relate to society at large. There’s no better atmosphere to think of than the friendly setting of a college campus, where the emphasis, says Jim, is not on what the deaf cannot do, but rather on what we together are able to do. Nowhere else to be found, NTID has its own deaf theatre and dancing ensemble. This one of America’s most effective technical campus, RIT lays on a 520 acre property, itself a city within the city of Rochester, in Western New York state, on the shore of Lake Ontario, a pleasantly quaint settlement in the United States.

As anywhere in America, even here we can find Hungarians. Paul Stropko is an instructor in automation and semiconductors. His father has emigrated almost a half century ago, himself a native born American and hard of hearing, but his speech is perfectly understandable and is an able lip reader. A former microelectronics engineer at IBM. He feels it’s natural for deaf people to receive advanced degrees and live full, normal lives. He’d be happy to teach Hungarian students as well but they would have to learn English because he, unfortunately, has never preserved his father’s mother tongue.

During our visit, the lab was serviced by a young man from India. He’s a hearing RIT student assisting the Lab’s maintenance on a part-time employment basis. When we asked what caliber folks has he met while working among the deaf, he responded with no words but a universal ear-to-ear smile and a thumbs up hand signal.

Rochester, July 2004

Gábor Horváth