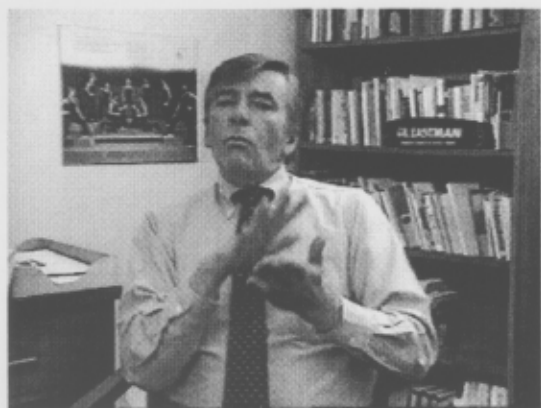


# **AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY GILBERT EASTMAN**



**CFE 3215V**

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OPEN CAPTIONED  
SIGN ENHANCERS, INC.  
1989  
Grade Levels: 7-13+  
40 minutes

## DESCRIPTION

Gilbert Eastman narrates his autobiography in American Sign Language. An Emmy-award winner, a drama professor, an author, a playwright, and an actor, Eastman shares the frustrations and triumphs of his life. In addition, Eastman performs “The Star Spangled Banner” and an original poem entitled “Winners.” Lou Fant, a well-known interpreter and actor, provides voice interpretation. DEAF CULTURE AUTOBIOGRAPHY SERIES.

## INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

- To present some details of the life of Gilbert Eastman.
- To discuss the influence of Eastman’s childhood on his career.
- To provide a role model for aspiring deaf actors and playwrights.
- To present a signed performance of the national anthem and an original poem.
- To motivate reading and performing of Eastman’s works.

## BEFORE SHOWING

1. Present Gilbert Eastman as a well-known co-host of *Deaf Mosaic*, a TV series that featured a variety of topics, people, and events in the deaf community.
2. Identify Eastman as a well-known lecturer on Laurent Clerc, America’s first deaf teacher. Provide a picture and a brief biography of Laurent Clerc.
3. Provide a brief biographical sketch. Display pictures and some of Eastman’s works on a time line. Include a picture of the American School for the Deaf.

## **DURING SHOWING**

1. View the video more than once, with one showing uninterrupted.
2. Cover the captions or turn off the audio to practice reading Eastman's signs.
3. Pause as necessary for concept clarification or visual breaks.

## **AFTER SHOWING**

### Discussion Items and Questions

1. Review Eastman's boyhood and family life.
  - a. Summarize Eastman's pastimes and their impact on his later life.
  - b. Discuss Eastman's frustrations with limited communication in his family and their community. Compare these with personal experiences.
2. Detail and compare Eastman's educational experiences at the American School for the Deaf, Gallaudet University, and Catholic University.
3. List Eastman's accomplishments and the way he makes the arts and media more accessible to deaf and hard of hearing people.
4. Discuss visual gestural communication as an essential part of American Sign Language.
5. Discuss how Eastman's experiences at the World Federation of the Deaf in Finland increased his appreciation of interpreters.

### Applications and Activities

1. Read Gil Eastman's works and choose one to perform.
2. Link the triumphs and frustrations in Eastman's own life to those of the characters in his plays.
  - a. Discuss styles of character development in the plays.

- b. Relate the themes of Eastman's plays to the Deaf experience.
- 3. Read *From Mime to Sign* and discuss.
- 4. Write a poem using a theme similar to "Winners." Dramatize it in ASL.
- 5. Watch an episode of *Deaf Mosaic*. Analyze Eastman's style of moderating. Discuss his sign language use and method of communication.
- 6. Study Eastman's interpretation of "The Star Spangled Banner." Compare with other interpretations. Dramatize, using local signs.
- 7. Prepare a poster illustrating five of Eastman's major accomplishments. Create a series of similar posters depicting other Deaf role models.
- 8. Research and report on Eastman's alma mater, the American School for the Deaf. Include people such as Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc.
- 9. Design the ideal theater for deaf and hard of hearing audiences. Discuss what modifications of existing theaters would be necessary.
- 10. Read about the National Theatre of the Deaf. Explore the possibilities of attending a local performance.
- 11. Discuss Gil Eastman's belief that readers should voice ASL verbatim during a play performance.
  - a. Compare the word order of ASL and English.
  - b. Generate a list of ASL idioms and expressions that would not make sense when vocalized to audiences unfamiliar with ASL.
- 12. At one time, Eastman assumed all responsibilities of a play performance. List and describe each role and its responsibilities.
- 13. *Sign Me Alice* was performed during an era of emerging and controversial linguistic research on recognition of ASL as a language. Research and compare that controversy with present attitudes.
- 14. Research and report on the World Federation of the Deaf.
- 15. Research and report on George W. Veditz and his mission to preserve ASL in media.

16. Discuss the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on accessibility in educational settings. Compare current available support services with those in Eastman's time.

17. View other autobiography tapes in this series. List similarities and keys to success.

## **SUMMARY**

Gil Eastman was born into a hearing family in Middletown, Connecticut, in 1937. Communication was limited to speechreading and writing on paper with his mother and fingerspelling with his two brothers. Childhood holidays were typically frustrating. Relatives sat around talking and laughing. Gil probed and the response was the same every time: "I will tell you later," which really meant never. At movies with his brothers or hearing friends, he asked what was so funny. "I'll tell you at home." Eastman never did learn why they laughed.

Eastman graduated from the American School for the Deaf in 1952. Some favorite memories include taking summer classes at an art studio, and role-playing movies the boys had seen during the previous weekend.

Eastman remembers a special toy, a cardboard plane cockpit. He spent hours imagining himself as a WW II pilot shooting down enemy planes. After he expressed his desire to become a pilot, his mother pointed out his deafness and discouraged him from pursuing that dream. This was the first time Eastman understood that deafness made him different.

A deaf high school teacher encouraged him to abandon his goal of becoming a printer and to attend Gallaudet College instead. Previous summer experiences as a printer with Traveler's Insurance Company led to a job offer in the art department upon graduation from college. Instead, Eastman took up the Dean of Students' offer to establish a drama department at Gallaudet. Meanwhile, he attended Catholic University and, even without appropriate support services, earned a master of fine arts degree.

Eastman married June Russi and raised a family of two hearing daughters, Alison and Ingrid.

Eastman helped David Hayes establish the National Theatre of the Deaf. Eastman authored a book on visual gestural communication, *From Mime to Sign*.

Eastman directed various plays over the years. After translating *Antigone* into American Sign Language, he incorporated a revolutionary technique: the readers were to voice ASL verbatim for the benefit of nonsigning audiences. He later wrote and published *Sign Me Alice*, a play with all deaf characters based on Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Lerner's *My Fair Lady*.

Subsequent plays followed, such as *Laurent Clerc: A Profile*. Improvisations from students contributed to a third play, *Hands*. Ten years later, after *What?* and *Aladdin and His Magic Lamp*, Eastman wrote *Sign Me Alice II*. After the Deaf President Now movement, he wrote *Can-Do: A Revue*.

He recalls fondly George W. Veditz's urging the preservation of ASL: "It is my hope that we all love and protect our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to deaf people."

Eastman hosted *Deaf Mosaic*, a TV series featuring stories of deaf people all over the world. He won an Emmy award for this show. He has also presented numerous workshops on Laurent Clerc and visual gestural communication.

Eastman closes with two signed performances: "The Star Spangled Banner" and "Winners," an original poem.