

## Summer Program Highlights

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Hello, my name is JiaFei Reeves. I am 20 years old and I live in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I have two brothers, one sister, and my mom. We are all Deaf except my mom, so we use American Sign Language to communicate. I currently attend Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf and Pittsburgh Public Schools. I was diagnosed with Usher Syndrome I when I was eleven years old. The reason it took so long was because I lived in an orphanage in China. They did not know I had Usher Syndrome. When I moved to America everything changed. I was quickly diagnosed and received the support I needed. As a result of Usher Syndrome, I am profoundly deaf and I have low vision in both eyes.

This past summer I had the opportunity to train at Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) for 6 weeks in Sands Point, New York. I went there to increase my skills in vocational training, independent living, assistive technology, communication skills, and orientation and mobility. The training program is open to Deaf/ Blind people all over the United States, so I met seven people in my class from several different states. At HKNC they have Deaf/Blind mentors who teach and support new students in the training program. It was awesome to work with mentors who know firsthand the challenges I face every day as a Deaf/Blind person. It was amazing to work and socialize with a group of people who have the same struggles I face every day. We learned and supported each other a lot throughout the training program and now I have lifelong friends.

I flew to Helen Keller National Center at the end of June with my service dog, Cruiser. We lived in the dorm and had our own room. Cruiser was excited to meet other dogs and play when he was not on duty. Every day we exercised on the track and visited with some of the classmates. There were four other guide dogs with participants in my class, so Cruiser did not get lonely. He had very good behavior and I felt proud of Cruiser.

At HKNC we had a strict schedule during the day. We went to classes every day during the week to learn about job skills, interview skills, college and community support and how to apply for jobs. We went to cooking classes, technology classes and classes that focused on apartment living, paying bills, and communication strategies. Every day was busy. Throughout my time at HKNC, I worked in the classroom and I had several opportunities for “hands on” experience outside the classroom. We had the chance to work in various settings while being paid in real world work situations. I worked at a hospital, a kitchen, Old Navy and Gap stores. Each experience was new and different. These experiences helped me identify my weaknesses and strengths. I explored career options that matched my personality. My favorite part of the program was the real world work experiences. The classes were good, but I really enjoyed going off campus and working with a job coach in community work experiences.

Another highlight at Helen Keller was the opportunity to use assistive technology. I learned about technological supports for Deaf/ Blind people and I got to try out various pieces of equipment to determine the best supports for me to access information. That was very cool.

In the evenings at Helen Keller and on the weekends we went on field trips and enjoyed time with classmates. Some of my classmates did not know sign language. They were learning later in life so I helped them with their sign language skills. We all helped each other. We went shopping at the mall and we went to the beach on the weekend. During the evening, most of us chatted about our families and shared information about support and strategies that help Deaf/Blind people function independently.

I am very glad I got the chance to participate in the summer program at Helen Keller National Center. Many times I feel alone, but at Helen Keller there were other people like me, so I did not feel isolated. Also, Helen Keller National Center employs many experts on Deaf/Blindness, so I learned a lot from professional people about travel, technology, career exploration, and independent living. Now that I am back home, I can implement strategies and goals that I learned from my summer experience at Helen Keller National Center.

JiaFei Reeves