



THE TACKLE BOX

Mackenzie Thorpe's painting depicts a solitary figure fishing from a pier, with a heart at the end of the line, set against a pastel moorland background.

Speaking Through Hands: Honoring the Diversity of Sign Languages

Did you know there are over 300 unique sign languages? This diversity springs from the numerous cultures and spoken languages they are derived from — reflected not only in the signs themselves but also in how signers incorporate facial expressions, gestures, and body language. Just as with spoken languages, regional “accents” (i.e., subtle variations in sign use and understanding) are common in sign language, adding nuance and depth (1, 2).

American Sign Language (ASL) is one of the most widely used sign languages, spoken in the United States, Canada, much of West Africa, and portions of Southeast Asia (3). In the United States, roughly 13% of Americans are deaf or hard of hearing and rely on sign language for communication (4). Although no single person created ASL, its roots trace back to the founding of the American School for the Deaf in Hartford in the early 1800s (2, 3). There, students blended French Sign Language with other sign languages, including American Indian Sign Language (AISL), also known as Hand Talk, to create ASL (5, 6). It is thought that AISL gave ASL its visual-spatial character, which emphasizes storytelling and expression (7).

Among the various American Indian Sign Languages and dialects, Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL) was the most widely used, historically serving as a lingua franca for both deaf and hearing tribal members (7, 8, 9). For centuries before European contact, PISL allowed individuals from different tribes who lacked a common spoken language to trade, negotiate, and interact socially (8, 9, 10). The integration of AISL into the social and ceremonial lives of Indigenous people reflects a broader cultural attitude toward disability and difference, suggesting that deafness was not viewed as a deficiency but as a natural aspect of human diversity (8).

SEPTEMBER AWARENESS MONTH & DAYS

- National Suicide Prevention Month
 - Call: 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- National Recovery Month
 - [FindSupport.org](https://www.findsupport.org)
 - [FindTreatment.gov](https://www.findtreatment.gov)
- Hispanic Heritage Month
 - NPR - [Yes, We're Calling It Hispanic Heritage Month And We Know It Makes Some Of You Cringe](#)
- Intergenerational Month
- Sept 4th - Richard Wright's Birthday
- Sept 11th - Patriot Day
- Sept 15th - International Day of Democracy
- Sept 18th - International Equal Pay Day
- Sept 21st - International Day of Peace
- Sept 23rd - International Day of Sign Language

Although subjugation, forced assimilation, and significant depopulation of Native peoples led to a decline in the use of AISL, there is now a movement to keep this unique language alive (6, 8, 11). Leaders such as Colin Denny and Melanie McKay-Cody, researchers at the University of Arizona, are not only preserving AISL but also ensuring it is taught to younger generations. Colin, for example, has brought national attention to PISL and advocated for the deaf and hard of hearing community – most notably by interpreting *America the Beautiful* in a mixture of ASL and AISL at Super Bowl LVII (11).

The deaf community in the United States has also faced harmful policies aimed at forced assimilation into mainstream society. The oralism movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries pushed deaf individuals to speak and lip-read rather than use sign language. This method, in addition to being largely ineffective and at times traumatizing, further marginalized the deaf community (8, 11). In recent years, advocates within the deaf and hard of hearing community have worked to increase recognition of ASL and expand the use of approaches such as the bilingual-bicultural (Bi-Bi) teaching method (11).

Both Native American communities and the deaf and hard of hearing community continue to work hard to undo the harmful effects of forced assimilation and homogenization (8). Leaders from within these groups are striving to create a more inclusive culture—one in which everyone is accepted for who they are and can fully express their true identities.

References

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Colin Denny stands smiling on a football field while performing *America the Beautiful* at the Super Bowl LVII



Mackenzie Thorpe's painting titled *In my Dreams* shows a solitary figure fishing from a pier at sunset. They sit with feet dangling from the end of the pier casting into calm water with a glowing red heart.

ARTIST: MACKENZIE THORPE

The artwork *The Heart of Winter* illustrates a wintry landscape featuring a solitary figure dragging a large heart along the tranquil banks of a serene, wooded lake.



Mackenzie's most famous painting, *Square Sheep*, shows a stylized image of a square-bodied ewe and two lambs standing in a field of small red hearts.

Shaped by his working-class upbringing in Middlesbrough and his struggles with dyslexia, Mackenzie Thorpe has not only become one of England's top-selling artists but has also used his experiences and passion to help disadvantaged youth and others in need. Although Mackenzie now embraces his dyslexia—acknowledging that his artistic ability is rooted in the way his neurodivergent mind works—this was not always the case. He struggled greatly in school, and after graduation he worked a variety of jobs before gaining the courage to apply to Byam Shaw College of Art in London. Although he did not immediately find success, the deep emotion in his work resonated with viewers, and over time he became a celebrated artist. His work has been exhibited in galleries throughout the UK, the United States, Japan, and Australia, and collected by figures including HM Queen Elizabeth II and actor Tom Hardy.

Mackenzie is passionate about building support for dyslexic and autistic children. Over the course of his career, he has conducted numerous workshops for children with disabilities and supported organizations such as the North East Autism Society, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, the Elton John AIDS Foundation, the National Society for the

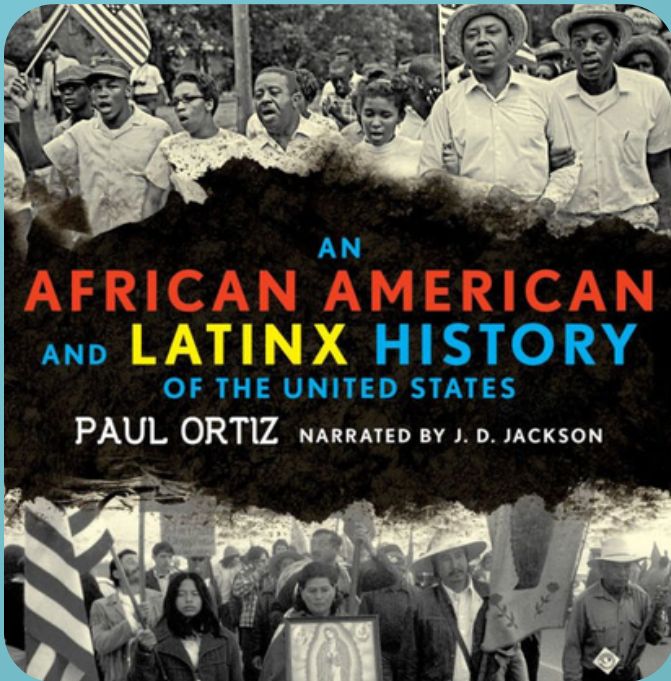
Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Japan Dyslexic Society, and the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand. He firmly believes that each neurodivergent individual has unique strengths and should be given the opportunity and tools to fully develop their abilities—because these individuals are fully capable of changing the world.

His simplistic but emotionally expressive style focuses on hope, love, community, and the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. When you view Mackenzie's work, you will notice two recurring features: hearts and simplified faces. Hearts represent his belief that love is the most important force in the world and that a world built on love would be a better place. The simplified faces arise from two sources. First, they reflect his experience of feeling like a "faceless" child while struggling with dyslexia in his youth. Second, they invite the viewer to focus on inner emotion, allowing the blank or simple faces of his figures to serve as mirrors in which viewers can see themselves—regardless of age, gender, or nationality. Mackenzie's art and life reminds us that from struggle can come beauty and strength, and that we should strive to make a world we want to live in rather than simply surviving in the one we find ourselves in.



The painting *With Me Dad* depicts a figure in a dark trench coat gently resting an arm on a child's shoulder. The child, wearing a red and white striped hat and scarf, holds a rugby ball against a foggy, moonlit industrial backdrop.

RECOMMEND LABOR DAY READ



Spanning more than two hundred years, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* provides a transformative and politically charged alternative to the history often taught in schools. In this work, scholar and activist [Paul Ortiz](#) argues that events in the “Global South” played a vital role in shaping America as we know it. Drawing from American, Latinx, and Indigenous voices, he debunks the myths of “manifest destiny” and “Jacksonian democracy” and instead tells the story of how working-class people fighting against repression, greed, and imperialism shaped our nation—including many of the labor rights and protections we enjoy today.

This inclusive and grassroots history reveals the diverse strategies that Latinx and African Americans have used to address both historical and ongoing issues in the United States. Ortiz’s intersectional approach makes this work well worth the read, which is available in both [audiobook](#) and [print](#) formats.

International

EQUAL PAY DAY

September 18th is [International Equal Pay Day](#), drawing attention to the stark reality that, on average, women earn significantly less than men—so much so that it can feel as though they stop receiving pay for the remainder of the year. By September, men have already earned what it will take women until the end of December to achieve, meaning women must work nearly three extra months to earn the same income as their male colleagues.

In fisheries, many women are fortunate to work for agencies and organizations with fixed pay scales based on position, ensuring they receive equal compensation to their male coworkers. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many women around the world. The gender pay gap persists due to discriminatory practices, unequal access to opportunities, and gender-based occupational segregation.

Observing this day helps place pressure on governments, employers, workers, and international organizations to take steps to ensure that women are paid equally when performing work of equal value. Beyond fair pay, adopting policies that foster equity and inclusivity in the workforce is essential to dismantling stereotypes and ensuring women have access to leadership positions and higher-paying jobs.

Institutions such as the [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO) play a vital role in achieving pay equality by providing educational resources and ratifying guiding policies that promote “equal remuneration for work of equal value without discrimination based on gender.” For more information on the gender pay gap, see the [ILO InfoStorie](#) on the subject.



On a backdrop of a world map an illustrated man (left) and woman (right) stand balanced on a scale.



Mackenzie Thorpe's *Feed the Birds* shows a quiet child with a giant red heart behind them feeding geese, chickens and small birds beneath a glowing cloudy sky, symbolizing kindness, love, and hope even through adversity.

Ally Corner: Hope Network

The Michigan-based Hope Network is a non-profit organization focused on providing healthcare and social services to aid those with disabilities or disadvantages in achieving their highest level of independence. Founded by Herb Start in 1963 to help individuals with disabilities in Grand Rapids, it has grown to serve over 30,000 people across more than 125 locations statewide. Today, it provides a wide array of services ranging from neurorehabilitation, mental healthcare, autism services, workforce development, and transportation. The goal of their programs is to bridge the care gap and create opportunities for community integration and personal growth. Due to their dedication to providing quality services, they were granted the highest level of accreditation by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities, which is a nonprofit organization that accredits health and human services programs worldwide.

Their programs have grown to include Hope Network Industries, which provides contract packaging and light industrial services. At their three facilities in Grand Rapids, Big Rapids, and Cadillac, they focus on providing jobs and training to individuals who face barriers, such as people with disabilities, refugees, and the formerly incarcerated. David Meyers' story provides an excellent example of the opportunities and changes that Hope Network can create. David is a materials and warehouse coordinator at Hope Network Industries, and after his release from prison, he worked with his husband to purchase homes where they house people in need. Without opportunities like those provided through Hope Network, people like David might never have the chance to create positive change within their communities. Programs and services provided by Hope Network are key components to building a more inclusive society where everyone can reach their full potential.



Know you are part of a caring community and never alone. The DEIJB Committee is working to foster an inclusive environment, ensuring MI AFS is welcoming to all. Get involved by reaching out to share resources or connect. Your voice matters! Contact us at mifishcastafs@gmail.com or submit items anonymously.

Warm Wishes -

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