

Honour comes as a huge surprise to E.C. principal

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This project has attracted attention worldwide, with visitors often coming to Gibson — the first linguistically and culturally Deaf principal in Ontario — from far away to pick her brain and see her project in action.

Last week, Gibson was bestowed a huge honour when she was appointed to the Order of Ontario, which recognizes excellence in various fields of endeavour. She was one of 28 people to be recognized.

When she first found out, Gibson thought there'd been some mistake.

"I never expected to be appointed. When I got the message from Queen's Park, I was shocked. I thought, 'Are they sure they have the right Heather?'"

Gibson signed that she felt awe-struck being appointed alongside such notable Ontarians.

The ceremony, which took place at Queen's Park, was quite nerve-racking, Gibson said, but unforgettable. Her medal was presented by Lieutenant Governor of Ontario David Onley.

"I've been describing it as a magical night," she said with a smile.

Gibson's curriculum is bilingual and bicultural. ASL is a language of instruction as well as a language of study, with English studied as a second language.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has been very supportive of the initiative, she said.

Weaving her way through the maze that is E.C. Drury School for the Deaf — which has more than 200 students in its day and residential programs — Gibson pointed to a sign advertising International Sign Language Day and explained there are many different sign languages around the world.

The Milton resident is a fan of any and all languages, and said the more a person knows, the better. Both her hearing sons, aged 10 and 14, are enrolled in French Immersion. They speak English as well as ASL, which is the family's first language.

Languages are simply good for the brain, Gibson said.

ASL currently has no

written form, so ASL literature — which has its own structure and has been passed down from generation to generation — is viewed on videotape.

In the past, Gibson said, English literature was translated into ASL for students. But these poems and stories weren't reflective of their culture, just as a French poem translated into English wouldn't express English culture and values.

"We can see a lot of the culture, experiences and perspectives of Deaf individuals in (ASL) poetry," Gibson said. "Other people view us as people who can't hear but that's not how we view ourselves. We have our own language and culture."

She explained her identity is based on her language rather than the fact she can't hear.

"Language is a very important part of people and who they are and gives them a sense of belonging," she signed.

Stephanie Hounsell can be reached at sthiessen@milton-canadianchampion.com.

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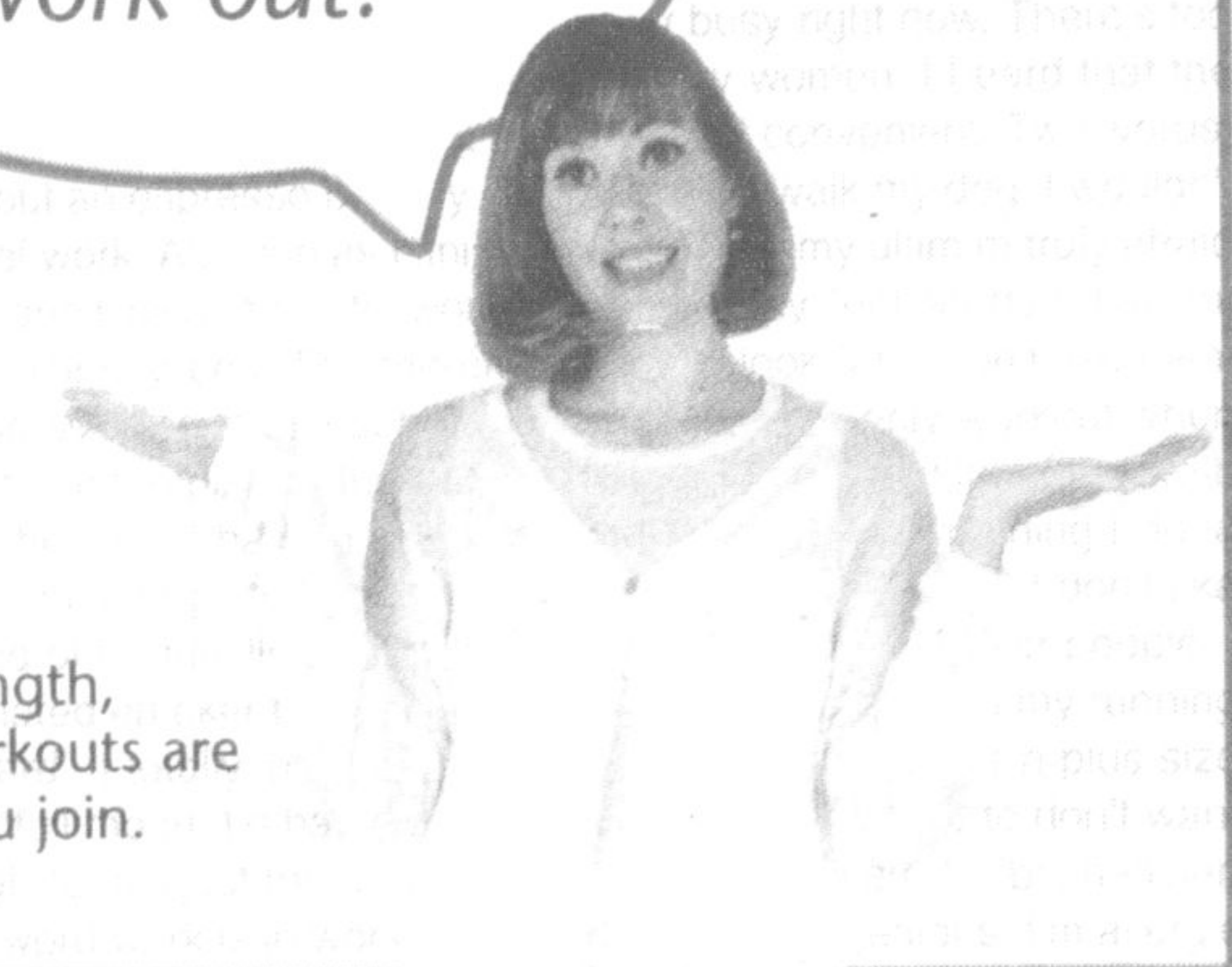
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