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Deaf history buffs get Philly GPS video tours

By SARA GANIM updated 10:43 a.m. CT, Mon., July. 14, 2008

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PHILADELPHIA - When 13-year-old Tyhira Jones goes to a museum, she normally spends so much time reading long explanatory texts that the history she eagerly wants to learn can get lost in translation.

Tyhira is deaf. Like 2 million other people in this country who use American Sign Language as their primary means of communication, she doesn't always get the full experience when she's on group tours designed for the hearing population.

"It takes forever for me to read a lot of times," she said through an interpreter.

On Friday, Tyhira and a dozen fellow students from the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf in Philadelphia tested out a virtual guided tour of the city's historic district in sign language.

The students were given GPS devices resembling a portable electronic game. On the 4-inch screen, a man in costume explained in sign language the significance of where they were standing.

The devices, called GPS Rangers, were invented by Lee Little, CEO of Austin, Texas-based BarZ Adventures Inc. Little said he was tired of paying for large-group guided tours that he couldn't always hear, so he built a gadget that would give video-guided tours triggered by a person's location — as determined by a GPS antenna inside the device.

When the students and teachers stepped up to the Liberty Bell on Friday and the devices began speaking to them, their mouths dropped and their faces lit up.

"We're just walking around and there it was," said Brianna Bruce, 13.

It's like having a personal guide, with a map and restroom locations built in, said 13-year-old Selena Ramos. If they miss something, they can replay it; if they like it, they can stay longer; if they aren't impressed, they can skip it.

"I can understand everything he's saying," Tyhira said. "This is so neat ... I'm really enjoying myself today."

About 25 different points in Philadelphia are programed into the GPS Ranger, Little said.

The devices are available at parks and zoos in more than 20 locations nationwide, but Philadelphia is the first with ASL as a language option, Little said. A hundred of the devices will be available to the public starting July 21, and will cost \$15.95 to rent. Available languages include German, Spanish and French.

Independence Visitors Corp., which runs the visitor center in the city's historic district, decided early on that ASL would be one of the languages available on the devices, general manager Christine Keates said.

It means that people who use ASL will no longer have to call ahead to arrange interpreted tours of places such as Independence Hall, the Betsy Ross House and the site of Ben Franklin's home, she said.

For people who are hard of hearing but don't know sign language, GPS Ranger also has closed captions.

"There are 28 million people who could conceivably benefit from this," said Rick Norris of Communications Service for the Deaf, a nonprofit organization that partnered with BarZ Adventures to add ASL to the device.

"We are looking at this to be something that could catapult or launch a nationwide trend, where a lot of our national parks or zoos, anything with a guided tour, would have this sort of technology," Norris said.

Pennsylvania School for the Deaf teacher Jessica Chou was impressed with the devices.

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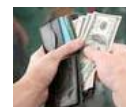


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all my friends because I have to read and then admire the exhibit."

She added that interpreters can miss things, reading directs her attention away from the exhibits, and guided tours don't stop for bathroom breaks.

The device also has a map, a calendar with daily and weekly events in the area and trivia questions and answers, Little said. It is also "12-year-old boy-proof," he told the group with a laugh.

"The unit is pretty rugged. If you drop it by accident, don't worry about it," he said.

That wasn't a problem for these kids — they didn't want to let the devices go.

"I wish I could bring this home," said 12-year-old Tyshea Riley.

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