

# Showing the signs of a great volunteer

By Ruth Rovner

For the Home News

Brian Morrison of Northern Liberties has a busy life as an instructor of American Sign Language, but he still finds time for volunteer activities. The most unusual is his role as an interpreter for deaf participants at the monthly event known as Gay Bingo.

Despite its name, it's attended by both gay and straight people, who come for the fun and novelty. It's indeed novel when someone calls "Bingo!" and then drag queens on roller skates glide over to the table to verify the winner. Their nickname as BVDs (Bingo Verifying Divas) is in keeping with the strictly fun and campy humor of this popular event, which is held in Center City at the Gershman YMHA.

When Morrison attended his first Gay Bingo event, "I was almost overwhelmed," he recalls. "I'd never seen anything like this."

Even though it's sheer fun, its purpose is serious: Gay Bingo is sponsored by the AIDS Fund, which raises money for HIV and AIDS services through ticket sales. An impressive \$3 million has been raised so far.

Morrison has been volunteering as a sign-language interpreter since 2002.

In recognition of his six years of dedicated service, he'll receive a special volunteer award on Friday night. He and fellow interpreting volunteer Charity Johnson are recipients of the Ferrara Family Volunteer Award, given each year by the AIDS Fund to outstanding volunteers. The awards will be presented at a gala event, the ninth annual Black Tie Gay Bingo, held in Philadelphia's Crystal Ballroom.

Morrison was taken by surprise when he learned about his award. "I was speechless," he says. "It's very humbling to be recognized in this way."

The recognition is well deserved. Although Gay Bingo is fun for the partici-

pants, Morrison works throughout the evening, making sure the deaf participants can take part in the 12 games each evening.

Then there's also the entertainment on the stage. Humorous skits are presented, prizes are awarded, and the hosts talk and joke with the crowd.

"We interpret the numbers but also what's happening on the stage," says Morrison. "We interpret everything we hear. For the audience, it's an incredible amount of fun — but for us, it can be challenging. Several people can be talking at the same time, and often they're silly, and that's part of the fun. Sometimes it's difficult to keep up with everything that's going on."

The deaf participants (usually six or eight regulars) are only a tiny minority of the overall crowd of several hundred.

"It's a very diverse crowd," he says.

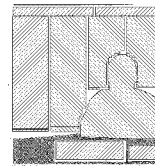
Gays and straight people, men and women, people of all ages. "Many older people come and there are also high school students who are volunteers," he says.

Morrison's students in his interpreting classes are also volunteers. Each time he attends he brings two students, who practice their skills during the bingo games.

"It's a wonderful learning experience," he says. "My students are up on the stage with a large audience, so they get the chance to work on their skills, but in a low-pressure, fun environment. And they love it."

Gay Bingo is not Morrison's only volunteer activity. He has been an interpreter for the annual AIDS Walk since 2002, when he first came to Philadelphia.

The walk always begins on the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art with the reading of names of AIDS victims from the area. As those names are read, Morrison interprets for people who are deaf.



During the walk, he also gets the chance to meet people personally. "I've met great people in the deaf community who are HIV-positive and gay," he says.

He also meets others who aren't deaf.

"As a gay person, it's good to see many others and feel part of a larger community," he says. "We're all sharing in the remembrance of those who died, and we're sharing in the fight against AIDS."

Morrison also is a volunteer for the Philadelphia Gay Men's Chorus. The group gives three concerts a year, and when they do, he's up front, interpreting the words of each song.

Then, too, at the annual Gay Pride Festival, he's on hand to interpret the musical performances that take place on the stage of Penn's Landing.

Of course, most of Morrison's interpreting activity is in the classroom at Camden County College in Blackwood, N.J., where he teaches students who will become interpreters for the deaf.

His own interest

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when he was a college student and took a course in American Sign Language. "I thought it would be an easy A," he confesses. "Instead, I discovered this whole other world. And I started to feel, 'This is where I'm supposed to be.'"

After Morrison earned a degree in deaf education, he started his career teaching deaf high-school students. But then his interest extended to teaching American Sign Language to others.

"It's a unique language with its own grammar and structure, and with twenty-six letters," he says. "It's a visual language based on concepts more than words."

Now he's dedicated to teaching others this unique language. But he also gets a chance to work directly with the deaf community in his volunteer efforts.

He enjoys all of them, but Gay Bingo is by far the most unusual. Six years after he began, he still looks eagerly to each event.

"It gives people a chance to raise money for AIDS in a really fun way," he says. "And I enjoy giving those in the deaf community a chance to be involved in this." ••

## BINGO!!!

**Gay Bingo events** are held monthly on Saturday evenings at the Gershman Y, Broad and Pine streets, starting at 7 p.m. The next two events are May 31 and June 14. Reserved-seating tickets are \$20 and balcony seating is \$15. For information or tickets, call 215-731-9255.



MATT GODFREY / HOME NEWS PHOTO  
**Brian Morrison interprets sign language** for weekly gay bingo at the Gershman Y as well as other events.

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