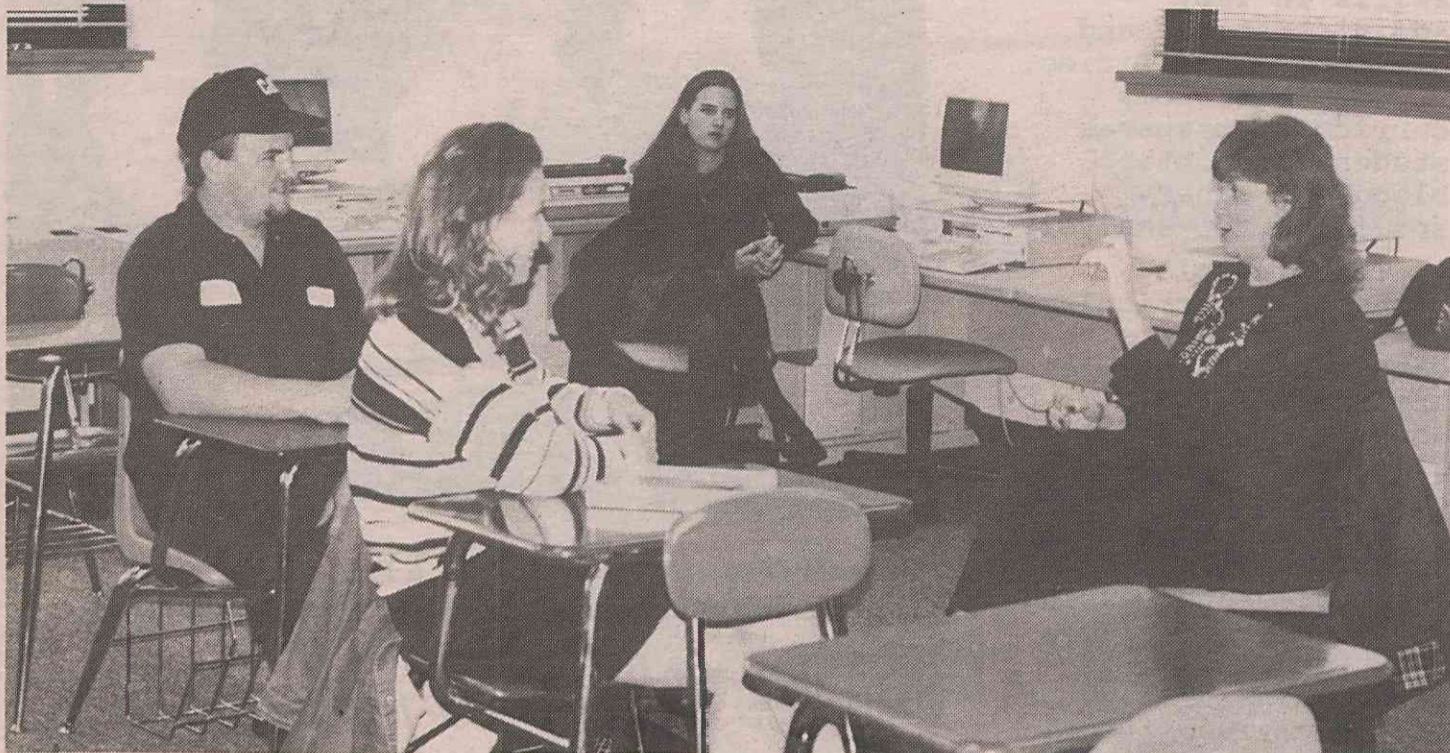


# Interpreter aids WCC's hearing impaired



Joannie Hughes signs for John Lanier during his English class lecture as classmates observe.  
PHOTO: ANGELA L. AGUIGUI

By SHOWNELL EZZELL

Some WCC students may be learning sign language inadvertently if they share classes with John Lanier, student in the automotive technology program, and his interpreter, Joanie Hughes, who has been helping Lanier since August as a paid employee of the college.

Hughes has been translating sign language for 27 years, having learned her skill through 50 workshops.

She was inspired in her youth by her neighbors, a deaf man and his wife who taught her a few signs.

Then years later she became interested in signing again, translating in her church.

Hughes said that she "loves and enjoys working at WCC."

Born in Wilmington, she now lives in Wilson.

In 1987 she met Sonya, then 7 years old, when she became Sonya's translator in elementary school.

Sonya was born 3 months premature.

She suffered severe hearing impairment as the result of underdeveloped inner ears.

When Sonya was 13, she tried through signing to tell her mother that her stepfather was sexually abusing her.

Because Sonya's mother had never learned to sign, Sonya's pleas for help went unheeded.

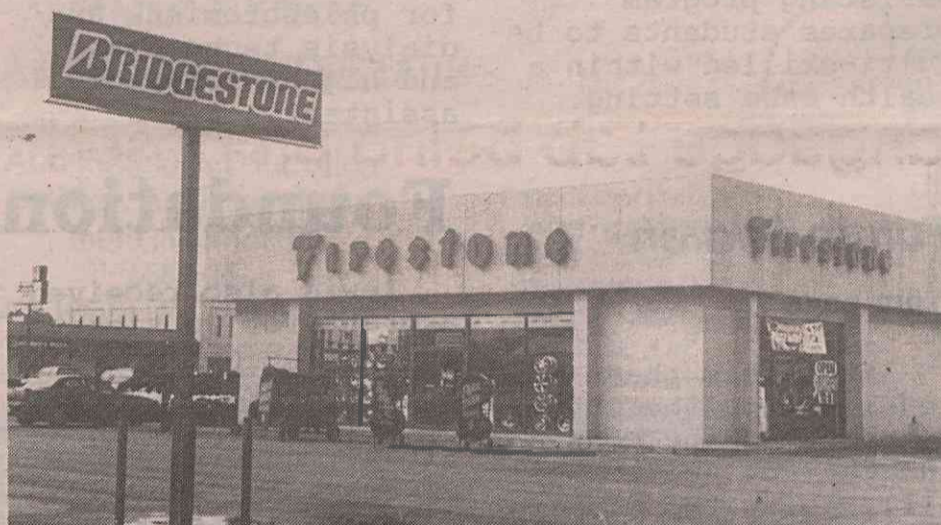
But Hughes responded to Sonya when Sonya called her.

Sonya started to spend a lot of time and weekends with Hughes.

Then when she was 15, she asked Hughes to fight for custody of her, and Hughes won the case.

Hughes said that in June 1995 People Weekly magazine interviewed her for an article because she had gained custody of a teenager, Sonya.

They are now living in Wilson with Hughes' daughters Kelli, 21, and Traci, 24.





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