

**Event:** An Interview with William B. Bonvillian about his brother, John D. Bonvillian, and *Simplified Signs: A Manual Sign-Communication System for Special Populations, Volumes 1 and 2*

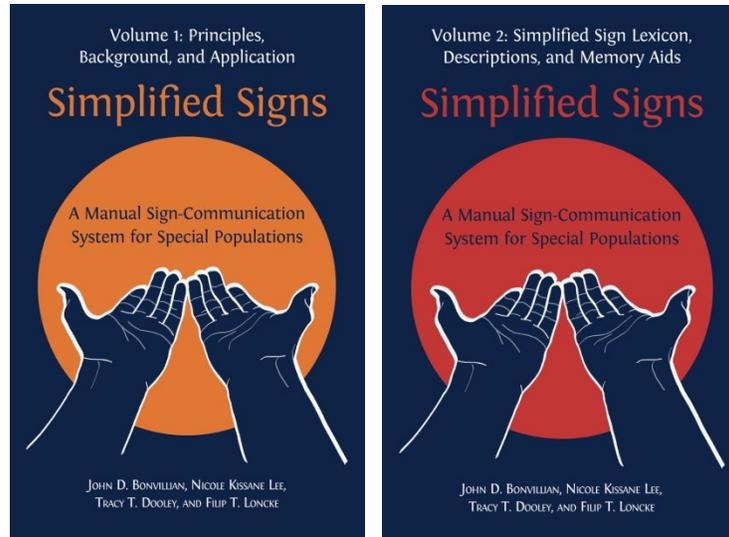


Figure 1 *Simplified Signs*, Volumes 1 and 2 Book Covers

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**Presenter:** William B. Bonvillian, brother of primary author, John D. Bonvillian

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**Transcript:**

[00:00] Visual: *Simplified Signs: A Manual Sign-Communication System for Special Populations*. [Letters written in blue against a small, rectangular, white background which itself is set against a larger navy blue background. To the right is an image of a large, orange circle with navy blue flat-hands, palms facing up, positioned in the lower half of the circle.] An interview with William B. Bonvillian. [Letters written in orange beneath the white rectangle.]

[00:05] Bill: Hello, my name is Bill Bonvillian. [Bill, a Caucasian man wearing glasses who has white hair and a white mustache, waves his hand at the side of his head while standing in front of a window that looks out upon a forest landscape. Displayed along the bottom of the screen is “William Boone Bonvillian” and underneath that is “Lecturer at MIT and Senior Director, MIT Open Learning.”] I’m here on behalf of my brother, the late John Doughty Bonvillian. [A picture is displayed of the face and shoulders of a smiling, partially bald, blond-haired, middle-aged Caucasian man with glasses. Displayed along the bottom of the screen is “John D. Bonvillian” and underneath that is “Emeritus Professor—Psychology Department at the University of Virginia.”] He was a professor at the University of Virginia. I’m here to introduce what I see as the capstone project of my brother’s academic career in Psychology and Linguistics: the Simplified Signs project.

[00:31] Bill: How is this work on Simplified Signs organized? It’s published in two volumes [Bill holds up two fingers for the sign for TWO]. Volume 1 [Bill holds up the index finger for the sign for ONE] is a summary of the research that underpins the Simplified Sign project. If you want to understand the evolution of signing and the science and psychology behind it, read this. Volume 2 contains the signs themselves. It includes illustrations and verbal descriptions of every sign as well as an index to help you find them. And I want to recognize here John’s three co-authors. Nicole Kissane Lee. Nikki is one of John’s former undergraduate students and an early architect of the Simplified Signs project. Nikki went on to become a medical doctor, and she’s now an Assistant Professor of Surgery at the Indiana University School of Medicine. Tracy Dooley, also a former student of John’s, who returned to the project in 2003 after earning a Master of Divinity degree and obtaining training in sign language interpreting. While my brother finished writing the books before he died, Tracy has been a collaborator for him on all aspects of the project, including on the writing, editing, and choice of signs. Most recently, she’s done all of the editing and proofing

of the final manuscript for this publication. Third, Filip Loncke. He is a professor at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. He joined the Simplified Sign project in the fall of 2000 when he became one of the faculty advisors for Nikki's distinguished undergraduate thesis about Simplified Signs. Before joining the faculty at UVA, Filip worked for 20 years as a psycholinguist and a school superintendent for services for children with disabilities. Filip has a Master's and a Ph.D. in Neurolinguistics from the University of Brussels. And last, I want to give a shout-out to our illustrator, Val Nelson-Metlay. Val created all of the illustrations for our signs. She was born hard-of-hearing and is now Deaf. She began to learn to sign at about age 25. Val graduated from the University of Kansas with a Bachelor in Fine Arts and has pursued a career as a professional artist.

[03:01] Bill:

What are Simplified Signs? They are a hand-communication system designed for people who have difficulty with spoken communication who don't have either the time or the ability to master a full sign language. The signs are designed [Bill holds up the index finger] to be easy to remember because they look like what they mean, [Bill holds up two fingers] easy to form because they don't use sophisticated positions or movements, [Bill holds up three fingers] easy to use because the signs are conceptual, meaning that one sign may be used for several words. So here, you know, a demonstration might be worth a thousand words. This is the sign for MUSIC [Bill demonstrates this sign with the pointing-hands arcing toward and away from each other multiple times in front of the body]. This sign is easy to remember because it mimics a conductor conducting an orchestra. It's simple to form because it doesn't require precise finger positions or hand movements, and it can be used to connote multiple words and ideas within the concept of MUSIC. So, it can mean "music," "orchestra," or "musician." It can mean "sing," "song," or "singer." It can mean "choir" or "concert." It can mean "to play an instrument." It changes with the context.

[04:32] Bill: How did the Simplified Sign project come about? Well, the project really was the culmination of my brother's academic career. He studied language development and sign language, and he applied that learning to the needs of special populations that have difficulty with spoken communication. The story starts when John was an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University, where he majored in Psychology with a focus on Cognition and Language. When he went to Stanford University for his Ph.D., he developed a special interest in sign language. At Stanford, John worked with a friend and colleague, Penny Patterson, who was teaching the now famous lowland gorilla, Koko, to use signs to communicate with her human keepers. Koko learned and used some 1000 signs. While my brother John spent much time "babysitting" for and signing with Koko, his own academic interests developed in the direction of the use of sign language by humans. Throughout his academic career teaching at the University of Virginia, he studied the acquisition and use of sign languages in a variety of contexts. He studied the use of signs by hearing children [correction: and Deaf children] of Deaf parents, by Deaf children of hearing parents, and by many others with special communication needs because of autism, cerebral palsy, aphasia. The work brought John into contact with many talented and dedicated educators, including in our special education system. One [Bill holds up the index finger] very prescient one was Gail Mayfield of the Grafton School in Virginia. She urged John to develop a sign-communication system that would better serve her Special Ed students who had difficulty mastering both spoken language and sign language.

[06:35] Bill: How were these Simplified Signs created? Well, my brother John was a careful academic. He was very careful and very academic. So, he began this task with studies—studies to identify precisely the types of difficulties these students, who had special communication needs, had in using the American Sign Language. The studies found that the most common errors involved were about difficulties in making precise hand formations and signs that

required multiple movements [Bill moves his hands back and forth]. My brother also found that both students and caregivers had difficulties in recalling signs that were not used often. With this knowledge, John and a small army of supporting students, studied hundreds [correction: dozens] of sign language dictionaries to find signs that were both [Bill holds up the index finger] easy to form and [Bill holds up two fingers] iconic, that is, easy to remember because they look like what they mean. They then tested every sign with cohorts of other students from the University of Virginia to ensure that they met the formation [Bill holds up the index finger] and recall criteria [Bill holds up two fingers]. The result was the Simplified Sign System of approximately 1800 signs.

[08:05] Bill: Who will use this simplified signing system? You know, the short answer to this is that anyone may use it, and all may have access. The Simplified Sign System was developed initially for people with special needs and their caregivers. This would include anyone with spoken communication impairments such as those that may accompany autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, and the many forms of aphasia. The system may be used anywhere—in Special Education classrooms, at homes, in hospitals. And, while the Simplified Sign System was being developed, my brother found that people were using the signs in other, unanticipated ways. Such as, to teach and learn foreign languages, to build vocabulary, to communicate with babies, to speak with patients in hospital settings. There really are no limits, and I encourage you [Bill demonstrates YOU with the index finger pointing forward] to experiment.

[09:14] Bill: To conclude, Simplified Signs was a labor of love—to help people. The project was 17 years in the making, by many dedicated people—students and faculty at the University of Virginia. I am honored to be able to present their project to the public now, free of charge, open access, through Open Book Publishers. Thank you,

and WE [Bill demonstrates with a pointing-hand arcing from one side of the chest to the other side] GIVE [Bill demonstrates with flat-hands arcing forward] YOU [Bill demonstrates with the index finger pointing forward] SIGNS [Bill demonstrates with 5-hands making alternating, vertical circles in front of the body].

[09:49] Visual: Thank you for watching. [Letters written in blue against a small, rectangular, white background which itself is set against a larger navy blue background. To the right is an image of a large, orange circle with navy blue flat-hands, palms facing up, positioned in the lower half of the circle.] This title is available at [doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0205](https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0205) [Letters written in red also located inside the white rectangle].