



Not Just Twins, but Deaf Too  
by David Spiecker

Ashley and Mary-Kate Olsen, Jena and Barbara Bush, even the Weasley twins — we've always held a fascination with twins.



Our interest in them goes a long way back. Twins have even turned up in mythology: In Greek mythology, Apollo and Artemis, the sun god and the moon goddess; in Egyptian mythology, Geb and Nut, the earth god and the sky goddess; and in the bible, Jacob and Esau.

Perhaps it's because the occurrence of twins is uncommon. After all, the National Center for Health Statistics recorded 133,122 twin births in 2005. 66,561 twins may seem like a lot, but 4,138,349 babies were born that same year — that only accounts for less than two percent of the babies born!

The mystique is heightened further by the different misconceptions surrounding twins. To name a few, “twins have ESP,” “one’s good and one’s evil,” and “all twins trade places to fool people.” More often than not, those myths remain just that: myths. There is, however, no denying that twins share a special relationship.

The fact that RIT has twins shouldn’t come as a surprise, but what makes some of those twins even more unique is the fact that they’re deaf as well. The National Technical Institute of the Deaf has three sets of twins currently enrolled. They are identical twins Brianna and Stephanie Green, both first year undecided majors, fraternal twins Brandon Austin, a first year Engineering undecided major, and Brittany Austin, a first year Psychology major, and identical twins Angelo Leccese, a first year Criminal Justice major, and Peter Leccese, a first year undecided major.

### Growing Up

The Green twins’ deafness wasn’t discovered until they were both two years old. At that point, their father started learning sign language and their mother picked some up along the way. When the time came for the Green twins to attend school, they were enrolled in a mainstream school in Columbus, Ohio which had a deaf program. Here, the Green twins had the option of remaining in a self-contained classroom used primarily for deaf students or joining their other peers for certain classes. Brianna said, “Ever since they found out that we were deaf, we’ve worn hearing aids and used ASL.”

Similarly, the Austin twins were believed to have been born deaf and, upon discovery of their condition, their parents immediately learned ASL. The Austin twins, just like the Green twins, are the only deaf members of their families. They attended the Northwest School for Hearing Impaired Children in Washington until the fifth grade when they were transferred into a public school. Since they were refused interpreting services, they then transferred to a mainstream school with a deaf program in Tacoma.

On the other hand, the Leccese twins, born deaf as well, were born into a deaf family. Their parents, as well as their older sister, are deaf. The twins attended a mainstream school with a deaf program at Tresper Clarke High School in Long Island, New York. They both wore hearing aids growing up, as well.

### Why RIT?

When asked about the reason why both twins decided to come to RIT, answers varied, but RIT’s accessibility seemed to be a major player. “I decided to come to RIT because it had all the access services for deaf people, but remained within a hearing environment,” said Brandon. “I went to Gallaudet to observe their program, but I felt that RIT was a better place to improve on my English,” said Brianna. Stephanie added, “Growing up, we were often ignored in English classes, so we didn’t learn very much.” The Leccese twins had a different reason for coming to RIT. “Our older sister went to Gallaudet and I’ve been there often. We’re well known there as well. So I just decided to come to RIT and start a new part of my life,” said Angelo.

### Double Trouble?

Ultimately, the question had to ask itself: “What’s it like being a twin?” The best answer came from Peter. It was, simply, “Badass.” He added, “We think alike. Other individuals think differently from each other, but we definitely think similar.”



Without skipping a beat, Angelo added, “Twins, yeah, definitely, it’s not how close people can be with each other, but we’re close enough to be able to read each other’s minds.” As soon as the sentence was finished, Peter said, “It’s like we have each other. We got our backs covered, we’re just right there. It’s like having a clone of yourself next to you. We’re always right there for each other.” Angelo concluded, “But, there’s one thing... We don’t share our women.”

The Green twins, although very close, don’t think that being twins has impacted their relationship significantly. Brianna and Stephanie say that they aren’t any closer to each other as they are with their sister. The Austin twins, however, are close to each other — perhaps due to the fact they they’re the only children in their family. “We’re really close. We talk to each other about almost everything... Well, almost everything,” said Britany with a laugh, “But we’re definitely not anything like the Olsen twins.”

### Regarding Deafness

Deafness is a complicated issue, mainly because the medical view and the societal view clash with each other.

The medical view considers deafness to be a disability of the individual, while the societal view considers the disability a result of barriers in society. In the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 30 percent of babies are born with hearing loss due to complications from a syndrome. After all, there are more than 400 syndromes that could cause deafness at birth. However, the remaining 70 percent of babies born with hearing loss are nonsyndromic — meaning that the baby does not have any other problems. As of 2005, in an estimation made by Gallaudet University, there were approximately 1,000,000 deaf people in the United States. Considering the relatively low number of twins, it’s surprising to see deaf twins.

The challenge of deafness is that approximately 90 percent of deaf

## Terminology

**Monozygotic (Identical):** occurs when a single egg is fertilized which then divides into two separate embryos.

**Dizygotic (Fraternal):** occurs when two eggs are implanted in the uterine wall and get fertilized at the same time.

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## Types of Twins

### Male-female twins

The most common, about 40 percent of all twins

### Female-female dizygotic twins

Sometimes called sororal twins

### Male-male dizygotic twins

### Female-female monozygotic twins

### Male-male monozygotic twins

The least common.

children are born into hearing families. Difficulty communicating often arises from those situations. All of the twins say they're fortunate to have families that have learned sign language for them. However, there are always times when communication becomes frustrating. "They [their parents] were shocked when they found out when we were deaf. We're the first twins in the family and the first deaf members in the family," said Stephanie, "Sometimes it's hard when everyone talks to each other and they forget to sign. I have to remind them to sign and sometimes my father gets annoyed by it. That's a whole other story. It's the hardest at the dinner table because everyone talks to each other and they don't interpret for me." "We have a big [extended] family, a lot of cousins," said Brianna, "They haven't learned sign language yet. My aunt and my cousin just started learning after they met our interpreter at our graduation party." They also commented that they get along with their family.

The Austin twins have a similar story. "It would be tough making hearing friends growing up, not just because most of them had

never seen an interpreter in class before, but we transferred a lot," said Brittany. Brandon added, "A lot of the times, they [other students] would look at us weird and not want to talk." "We ended up being there for each other a lot," said Brittany, "we were together all the way in school... Depending on our moods, we get along sometimes. We aren't very close to our parents." Brandon added, "This is largely due to differences in our interests."

The Leccese twins are aware that they have a different story to tell. "It's rare that you have a deaf family, much less a twin. I'm lucky to have both; we have our family and each other," said Peter. "It doesn't matter if you have a deaf family, a twin, or whatever, you should appreciate the fact that you have a family," said Angelo, "We get along great with our family, the communication's great."

It seems that, with whatever challenges that life may throw at them, the twins go to each other for support and for common ground — especially communication. "It's funny, growing up, I learned how to use ASL. My father signed using a lot of English and I had to teach him how

to use ASL. When I first came here, a lot of people here signed just like my father. I'm getting used to that," said Stephanie, "When the family talks to each other, we'd just talk to each other." The Austin twins had a similar case, where they would talk to each other if nobody else were signing. The Leccese twins say that they're very involved in the Deaf community as a result of the communicative opportunities they've had with their family.

Watching how they interacted with each other as the twins told their stories, their relationships became evident. They finished each other's sentences, they could explain each other if I couldn't understand what they meant, and they often looked at each other before answering my questions. Perhaps, it's because the twins have had to overcome so much more as deaf people that they've developed a closer bond with each other. All this left me thinking, "Twins have ESP." •

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## Some Interesting Twin Facts

Twinning passes down the maternal line.

Over 50 percent of twins are born before 37 weeks.

If a mother has already had a set of fraternal twins, the chances of having another set of fraternal twins are increased. Most women who conceive fraternal twins show a pattern of releasing more than one egg per cycle.

Twins don't have to be born on the same day. The longest gap is 85 days. One woman, Peggy Lynn, gave birth to her daughter, Hanna, on November 11, 1995, and her son, Eric, on February 2, 1996.

Up to 22 percent of twins are left-handed, whereas only 10 percent of the general population are left-handed.

Children of identical twins are genetically half siblings.

If identical twins marry identical twins, their children will legally be cousins, but will genetically be full siblings.

Conjoined twins are monozygotic twins whose bodies have merged during pregnancy.

A human chimera, an individual holding two or more sets of different DNA, can be formed by the merging of twin embryos during pregnancy. If the twins in question were monozygotic (identical), then it would be impossible to detect.

