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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“The Challenges of Deaf Women in Society:  
an Investigative Report”**

written by

**Megan Harris**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Mrs. Carol Morgan, thesis director

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June 5, 2020

The Challenges of Deaf Women in Society: An Investigative Report

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HNRS 4982: Honors Thesis

### **Abstract**

History has recorded the mistreatment of both Deaf people and women across time and cultures. The discrimination, struggle for rights, and the strides of progress thus far are congruent themes in both narratives, but neither expressly acknowledges the experiences of Deaf women, who encounter prejudice for both labels. In order to ascertain the breadth and magnitude of Deaf women's challenges, their role and limitations in Deaf history, and their personal and social difficulties today were researched. These challenges are then illustrated by six personal accounts from modern Deaf women. The results of the study indicated that Deaf women experienced and continue to experience gender-based discrimination from both Deaf culture and the hearing world, and social prejudice and stereotypes from the hearing world based on their deafness. These biases in turn affect their development, identity, education, vocation, income, relationships, and personal success.

*Keywords:* Deaf, women, challenges, society, history, discrimination, identity

## **Part One: Summary of Deaf History**

### **Chapter One: Early History**

When referring to Deaf culture, the capitalization of “Deaf” denotes the identification with the Deaf community as a linguistic and sociological minority. This distinction is preferred by members of the Deaf community. Conversely, the lowercase “deaf” is utilized for the medical condition of deafness or any person that expressly identifies as “deafened”. Due to the increase of deaf schools and education across Europe and America, lifelong communities were formed by students. These communities interconnected and developed into Deaf culture, which is thriving in the present day. This progression affects the denotation of students and children as they entered schools as deaf, but graduated as culturally Deaf, with a supportive community with which to identify.

World history is full of examples of inhumane treatment of less powerful minorities by more powerful majorities. Across cultures, the vulnerable groups traditionally have been women, racial minorities, and people with disabilities. One specific subgroup as seen in history is the Deaf. The history of the Deaf has been primarily written from the male perspective, and focuses on Deaf education, while the historical experience of Deaf females was considered secondary or only worth brief mentioning (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006). Therefore, an investigation into the societal challenges of historical Deaf women is warranted.

Before discussing societal challenges for Deaf women, a brief history of Deaf education is offered. Without education, a person will struggle to successfully live and function. A primary challenge of any society is teaching the next generation. However, until the first school for the deaf was formed in France at the end of the eighteenth century, people who were deaf did not get

an education, and by extension, did not get to act as a part of society. In fact, if a child was born deaf, it was thought that the parents must have done something wicked to deserve a cursed child. Common practice was to abandon deaf children by roadsides as soon as families realized something was different. The deaf were perceived to be developmentally disabled, and as such, they had no legal status, could not marry, represent themselves in court, or receive an inheritance. The Catholic Church believed that the deaf were not only uneducable, but incapable of receiving salvation. This misconception was based on interpretations of the words of Saint Paul “So faith comes through hearing, and hearing the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17 ESV). Saint Augustine declared that “the impairment [of hearing] prevents faith.” Public opinion slowly began to change after Abbe Charles-Michel de l’ Épée reasoned with the words of St. John: “But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31 ESV). Additionally, his work and public exercises with deaf students illustrated mental capabilities which would permit the deaf a comprehension of salvation.

### *Manualists*

The manual alphabet that l’ Épée, Sicard, and most early educators of the deaf used came from the work of Juan Pablo Bonet (1600s). A philologist, Bonet reasoned that the best way to educate the deaf was to have a symbol to represent each speech sound (he was not the first to have this theory, but his workbook was the best and most used). This use of sight to compensate for the absence of hearing particularly appealed to Péréire (page 9) and contemporaries, who were fascinated with studying the senses. Bonet’s method was used by Péréire, l’ Épée, Sicard, and Clerc, who brought it to America. With the exception of certain directionalities of the hands,

such as fingers facing up instead of to the side, American Sign Language (ASL) is almost exactly the same as Bonet's manual signs (Lane, 1984).

The Saint-Jacques National Institute for the Deaf-Mutes was created in 1794. Originally a monastery, it was repossessed from monks during the French Revolution, and turned over to the Abbe Charles-Michel de l' Épée to create the school. He and his successor, Abbe Roch-Ambroise Sicard, both wrote the first two formal books on educating the deaf. The goal of both directors was to educate the deaf into Christian salvation by using the Bible and Catholic materials as curriculum for both grammar and religion. The school was a blessing to deaf students, who had access to formal communication with others like them for the first time. The deaf in bigger cities such as Paris were socially better off than deaf in rural areas, where organized "manual" language had not been formed or shared. Those who did wish to communicate with deaf-mutes would use pantomime that mostly centered around physical needs or instructions (Lane, 1984).

Abbe Charles-Michel de l' Épée was born into a wealthy family. He tried to enter the priesthood, but was denied due to his personal beliefs conflicting with church doctrine. Little is known about his early adulthood, save that he moved to Paris and continued to work with the poor. There he encountered two deaf women, and the experience left him with such compassion for the deaf it led him to the work that would create his legacy and occupy the remainder of his life.

L' Épée's method for educating his students was an intensive process. First, the student would learn the manual fingerspelling alphabet. Then, he would learn to write letters in order to conjugate verbs. Next came nouns, usually physical and tangible in nature such as the naming of

parts of the body. After that were signs for the persons and tenses within the conjugation of verbs, coupled with some prepositional phrases and articles. This background provided the ingredients for some simple sentences, and the pupils would continue to collect signs for nouns and verbs that grew in complexity. A student of Sicard, Roch-Ambroise Bébien, realized how unnecessarily bulky and awkward manual signage was, and worked with Laurent Clerc (page 14) to convince schools to remove it from curriculum. By the end of the 1830s Bébien and Clerc were successful.

L'Épée's work with deaf students and numerous articles on his experiences led to the creation of several schools for the deaf across Europe, and that number grew exponentially under Sicard's tenure. L'Épée died in 1789, having put every last penny toward his school. The National Assembly promised Sicard to honor L'Épée by continuing to provide government funding for his beloved school and pupils. In spite of his sincere love and work for the deaf, L'Épée retained his prejudice that sign was not a real language, and consistently worked to "convert" it to French. He created signs for the past, perfect and imperfect, gendered verbs, suffixes and prefixes, and many intangible concepts, such as intelligence. L'Épée's methods proved to create winding, unwieldy sentences that were difficult to follow in grammar and topic. As an alternative to manualism, his students preferred to learn written French and translate it into French Sign Language. Although he held lifelong prejudicial theories, L'Épée was still the first to ask the deaf to teach their own way of communication to him. His efforts earned him lifelong honor, a lasting posthumous legacy, and a general pardon by the Deaf for his beliefs (Lane, 1984).

Jean Massieu is an example of L'Épée's successful use of students to promote his educational methods. As a child Massieu was abandoned by his fairly wealthy family to an



asylum for the insane, where he was preyed upon by hearing bullies. He was then rescued by l'Épée, who placed him in the newly formed school. Because of social prejudice, l'Épée's work with the deaf was seen as nothing short of miraculous. He also taught his students sign in multiple languages to illustrate that the deaf of any country were capable of formal instruction, but also to garner vital funding from international nobility.

Massieu went on to become the first educator of the Deaf who was Deaf himself, and was an icon to Deaf communities across the globe of what the Deaf could achieve with education. He taught French Sign Language and manual language to Sicard, Laurent Clerc (page 14), and later to the American deaf advocate Thomas Gallaudet, founder of the first school for the deaf in America. Massieu spent his life dedicated to Sicard, the school, and campaigning for the education of the deaf. He would often assist Sicard in public exercises that drew in funds for the school by catering to the general public's interest in the plight of the deaf-mutes. These exercises kept the school physically and financially safe during tenuous times of the Revolution.

Abbe Roch-Ambroise Sicard was the successor of l'Épée as director of the Saint Jacques National Institute. As he was making his way through the ranks within the Church, Sicard realized that educating the deaf would garner more of the public's interest, and enlisted the help of friend and educator Jean Saint-Sernin for help in creating a school in Bordeaux. While Saint-Sernin worked consistently with students, Sicard would rarely be at the school, consistently attending to social obligations. When the Abbe de l'Épée died, Sicard disregarded the Abbe's choice for a successor and put the matter to the court of public opinion. He won his own popularity competition, and was subsequently appointed by Louis XVI to director of the school. The institute was in a state of disrepair and decline due to a lack of funds. Sicard took it upon himself to display his students' abilities before courts and crowds. He continued this practice

throughout his tenure. This public display not only secured government funding, it also served to keep himself at center stage in social spheres. The public loved him and flocked to his demonstrations.

### *Oralists*

The opposing deaf education method to manualism was oralism, or teaching people who are deaf verbal speech. The most successful oralist of the time was Jacob Rodrigues P reire (1700s). He and his contemporaries had the same general tenet: that hearing teachers of the deaf ought to educate their students by cajoling sounds out of their mouths in order to create phonemes, syllables, and words. This oralist philosophy was primarily in place to garner funds and attention from society’s wealthiest nobility— claiming to “restore” their deaf children back to them (Lane, 1984). A private teacher for the wealthy, P reire’s prized pupil was Marie Marois, a deaf-mute who he began teaching when she was seven years old. She had some residual hearing, and constantly practiced her lip reading. P reire presented her and other female students to European royalty to display his success. The women would recite compliments to their hosts, and P reire would sign questions for the women who could not lipread. He taught his students speech with constant training throughout the day. He would exaggerate his speech to illustrate sound production, and would even physically manipulate the students’ mouths to make the correct speech sounds. His method of teaching was a closely guarded secret, even after his passing. Baron De Gerando carefully researched P reire’s methods in order to promote oralist theory. His conclusion was that P reire supplemented the manual alphabet with his own unique symbols that indicated to students how their articulators should move to make a given sound.

In life he garnered the loyalty from his students, though it is now understood that P ereire did not effectively teach speech production but merely the repetition of mouth movement. Marois and other students reportedly lost their “ability” to speak shortly after leaving his tutelage, though many were far better educated in matters of general academics than when they arrived. Unfortunately, there is believed to be no true P ereire method, and the vault of his “secret teachings” was empty from the start (Lane, 1984).

As P ereire grew close to the end of his life and l’  p ee was becoming established in his scholastic career, there were two parties supporting different schools of thought for deaf education. In one corner, a follower of P ereire, Abb e Dechamps, was adamantly against signing. Meanwhile Pierre Deloges defended the use of sign. P ereire seemed to be sympathetic toward both sides, while still promoting oralism as the best deaf education method. L’  p ee and most subsequent educators of the deaf gravitated toward Deloges’ more logical arguments. L’  p ee saw oralism not as inherently wrong, but as a distractor from all that he had to teach to his growing number of students. Sicard followed suit, citing that so few of the Deaf students gave it merit, that he thought it better to educate their minds than their mouths. This put P ereire and l’  p ee at odds, publicly insulting each other’s personal method of instruction. Eventually, l’  p ee won out favor over his rival, but not on his own merit. His method was certainly more practical and favored by Deaf students, but P ereire was ethnically Jewish, and l’  p ee’s Catholicism in an exuberantly Catholic Paris won him royal funding, pushing him forward in the eyes of academia and the public.

Despite P ereire’s loss to l’  p ee at the end of his life, oralism spread across the rest of the continent, leading some into the realm of ableism. As was tradition, most oralist teachers kept

their methods a closely guarded secret in order to keep their work in demand, but documentation indicates they rarely had variation between their processes (Lane, 1984).

During the blossoming of sign in the Deaf community, disciples of oralism fought tirelessly to sabotage the culture. A contemporary of Sicard, Dr. Jean-Marc Itard was a physician to the deaf students at the Saint-Jacques National Institute. An oralist, he was charged with the education of a deaf “wild boy” to turn him into a cultured young man. Naming his new student Victor, he worked tirelessly for four years to create a speaking man out of the feral boy. After years of more failures than successes, Itard left Victor to the care of a boarding home, where he only retained part of his speech and little social skill. After dismissing his student, Itard began to perform medical research on deaf students at the school. His favorite experiment was to flush out the middle ear via the Eustachian tube. It was incredibly painful, left some students with infections, and yielded no new information or medical change. After several years of performing various painful experiments, he proclaimed that the ear of the deaf was dead, irredeemable by medicine. Itard stated that the man without hearing and speech is subhuman. He never learned a sign in his forty years as a physician to the deaf. It was not until the end of his life that Itard admitted the necessity of sign even as part of the oralism process, and acknowledged sign as a language of its own for a unique society (Lane, 1984).

After Itard’s death, Baron De Gerando became the foremost expert and proponent of oralism. One of the most paradoxical aspects of De Gerando was his constant philanthropy. He opened homes for former prostitutes, schools for the poor, and even took in orphaned children of his relatives. These philanthropic endeavors gave De Gerando an opportunity to flaunt his wealth and use his position to declare deafness not a condition, but an infirmity. The Baron became head of the administrative board at the Saint-Jacques Institute after Sicard’s death, and attempted to

transition the school into one for the hearing, with little support. He mistreated Deaf staff and dismissed many in order to make space for hearing teachers to help with oral articulation.

However, the remaining staff and students stood steadfast and continued to learn exclusively in sign, and the fired teachers won a petition to return to their positions, effectively blocking De Gerando's ambitions. After such an outcry from the school, De Gerando acknowledged under duress that French Sign Language was the first language of his school. By 1836, the oralist movement was stagnant and essentially disintegrated in France (Lane, 1984).

The most prominent oralist in England was Thomas Braidwood, perhaps the only contemporary of P reire who shared similar levels of success. Braidwood gradually created a small monopoly of schools throughout Great Britain, and attempted to build one in America. Braidwood left his schools to his family, who continued to closely guard their "unique methods". It was an ironic stroke of fate that Thomas Gallaudet visited the main school in order to learn the secrets of deaf education to take back to America. It was a teacher's refusal to reveal Braidwood's secrets that led Gallaudet to Sicard, effectively reducing the overall spread of oralism in American schools (Van Cleve, 2007).

The first American deaf child to be formally educated was Charles Green, at Braidwood's English school. His father, Francis Green, was in such awe of his son's progress that he became a lifelong advocate of deaf education, although he came to disagree with oralism. It was a combination of factors that drew Green from oralism to sign. The first issue was his son's later regression and loss of speech, common for students of oralism. Secondly, he reached out to Braidwood to collaborate with him on an instruction book for the poor. Braidwood refused to help, and was offended that Green would ask him to help those who could not pay. Green then visited with Sicard twice to learn his methodologies. Those visits inspired him to become a

devoted advocate for deaf education and the use of sign in American schools, even publishing in any New York newspaper that would print his work. Unfortunately, he died almost a decade before Gallaudet would bring his dream to fruition (Van Cleve, 2007).

As deaf schools spread across Europe, not only did the schools grow, but so did communities of Deaf people in the host cities. The access to academics, combined with the welcoming atmosphere and instruction in sign, produced small societies of well-educated Deaf people. Deaf men came into positions of government, created written systems and entire dictionaries of sign, created and headed schools for deaf children, and even managed to remove the cumbersome manual signs of l' Épée and Sicard from curriculum (Lane, 1984).

## **Chapter Two: Deaf Education Comes to America**

Before Thomas Gallaudet became the great man of his legacy, he was unsure of his path. A Yale graduate by eighteen, he started down several vocational paths before tentatively settling into a prestigious seminary to become a pastor. While visiting with the Cogswells, a fellow first family of Hartford, Connecticut, Gallaudet encountered their eldest daughter Alice in 1813. Six years before, she had lost her hearing to scarlet fever. Even though she experienced an overall physical recovery, she had begun to mentally waste away, despite her parents' best efforts. However, Gallaudet spent an afternoon with her, teaching her how to spell hat, and associate it with his own hat. Delighted by his "lesson", he ran to the house to inform her parents. Dr. Cogswell immediately sent his daughter to a school run by a poetess who was fond of children with conditions and infirmities. In spite of the infantilizing view of deaf and blind children held

by the poetess, Alice flourished under her tutelage, which inspired Mason Cogswell to form a plan.

Dr. Mason Cogswell was considered the best obstetrician in the state of Connecticut, and a revered citizen of Hartford. An empathetic man of means, he read tirelessly to educate himself on his daughter's condition and saw the need for deaf education in the United States. Although he waited a few years until Gallaudet finished seminary, Cogswell put forth a plan to a group of sponsors composed of leaders and wealthy businessmen to start forging a path to the first American school for the deaf. They created a committee to appoint the first teacher, for which Gallaudet was the obvious choice- he had spent his postgraduate time teaching Alice. Once the committee had collected sufficient funds, he set off to Great Britain to learn the methods of deaf education (Van Cleve, 2007).

England was still faithful to oralism when Thomas Gallaudet arrived. He was greeted coldly and expected to spend years earning trust before receiving the "secrets" of the trade. Were it not for his deep-seated federalism and opposition to the French Revolution, he would have more readily explored deaf education via sign in France. Although warmly welcomed by Sicard, after two months, Gallaudet could bear his homesickness no longer, even though he still needed many months of training. He turned to Laurent Clerc, and asked him to join in his efforts to found an American school (Van Cleve, 2007). Clerc had been in the same teaching position for many years with no raise, and felt compassion for the deaf children of the western world. Though Clerc dreaded the thought of leaving Paris and the Catholic church, he told Gallaudet to put the matter before Sicard. Sicard expressed anguish at the thought of Clerc endangering his faith and very soul by leaving the one true church, and even wrote Clerc's mother about the situation. Eventually, both grudgingly gave their approval, provided Clerc was vigilant in nourishing his

Catholic faith. Thus Clerc set off with Gallaudet, considered the apostle of deaf-mutes to the New World (Lane, 1984).

Before regrouping at the Cogswell home, Gallaudet and Clerc visited the president of Yale, Timothy Dwight, for advice on how to ask for donations during a time of heightened individualism. Dwight warned them about those who may expect a return on their investment. Informed of the social terrain, the pair was joined by Cogswell to begin the fundraising campaign. They met several obstacles along the way, from stingy government officials to the rumor of a school in New York, which caused loyal residents to withhold funding in favor of the localized school. As the group traveled the major cities, the news of Braidwood's plans for an American school further slowed the campaign. However, Braidwood was forced to withdraw his ambitions in order to manage his British schools, and the New York school ultimately fell through. As the trio returned to Hartford, a committee was formed that pushed the city to put funds toward the school and created its legislation. By the time the fundraisers were home, the combination of their collections, donations from other states, international friends, and the government of Connecticut had totaled to \$17,000 — enough to start the first official American school for deaf children in 1817 (Van Cleve, 2007).

As the school flourished, students began to graduate and return home, creating an interconnected network of Deaf societies and communities across the country. Additionally, state governments began to fund deaf schools for their students, causing a demand of principals and teachers to be educated at the Hartford location. Satellite institutions modeled after Clerc's classroom were everywhere. The deaf were provided with education, a trade, and connection to students like themselves. Most schools blossomed and grew. It was Gallaudet's son, Edward, who would create the first college for the deaf in 1857, now known as Gallaudet University.



Edward Gallaudet was fairly young when he started the deaf college, and could not have done so without Amos Kendall, his patron and partner. Kendall was a brilliant man of society—journalist, businessman, and politician. He became a deaf advocate after rescuing children from a former friend's supposed school for the deaf, where they were locked up without attention for days. His new wards needed schooling, and it was an experience that opened his eyes to the needs of the deaf. Kendall contacted Edward Gallaudet, a recent college graduate, and offered to help him start up the university if Gallaudet would run it. The two opened the school on Kendall's estate, and their request for government funding was granted by Congress. In 1864, in the middle of the civil war, the National Deaf-Mute College was born, and later renamed Gallaudet University (Lane, 1984).

### *Oralism Develops in America*

Though the number of schools grew in the United States, the philosophy behind their education regressed toward oralism at the turn of the century. In 1844, Horace Mann and Sawyer Gridley toured European schools for the deaf, and concluded that oralism was the best methodology. Upon returning to America, they fomented opposition to manual modes from educators as well as the public. Parents were eager to have their children learn to speak and function gracefully in hearing society, and were displeased with the communication solely with other deaf people that manual sign provided. As Mann worked to revitalize the Massachusetts school system, he worked to use oralism to make every classroom inclusive. However, children with disorders, disabilities, low functioning, and immigrant children proved to strain resources and the efficacy of the standard classroom. In order to keep the quality of education promised to “normal” children, schools devised the official creation of separate, special classrooms. These

classrooms developed into a variety of institutions and day schools for children with special needs (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006).

### ***Role of Women in Deaf Education***

For the first quarter of the nineteenth century, women were rarely allowed into any profession. However, by the 1830s women began to quietly enter the workforce as teachers. In 1839, Mann founded the first “regular school”, the colloquial and historical term for schools that did not have a special education classroom, in Lexington, Massachusetts. Mann realized that the majority of candidates for positions at his school were young women. He discovered that men were choosing better paying or easier jobs. School districts were publicly funded and relied on the frugality of the administration. Leadership began to hire women for a third less of the salaries paid to male teachers. By midcentury, female teachers were commonplace across the nation. Institutions for children with special needs, and especially schools for the deaf and dumb, followed suit by the end of the 1850s. As more men left to work in commercial and technological industries, women took up the mantle and responsibilities of the educational system (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006).

In spite of the disproportionate pay, women in all school systems were quickly heralded as excellent educators. Their success and expertise were credited to their innate maternal and nurturing instincts. This prevailing notion of a natural, matronly disposition meant that schools would hire and place women into elementary classrooms with little to no pedagogical training. Advanced training for general and special education was reserved for men, who would teach older students. Women were intentionally restricted to teaching younger children, since men were thought to not have the patience to work with little ones.

In 1867, the Clarke Institute was founded in Massachusetts by Harriet Rogers, who inspired Sarah Fuller to open the Horace Mann School for Deaf-Mutes in 1869. During the 1860s, the dispute between oralist and manual conclaves reached its peak. As oral schools became entirely composed of women, matriarchal leadership and a familial environment became the standard for oralist classes. In order to set themselves apart from and above manual schools, oralist leadership reformed curriculum and developed impressive academic standards. The magnitude of their advancements was undercut, however, due to the careful selection of students of wealthy, well-bred families and rejection of children who exhibited excessive delays or were from a poor family (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006).

By the 1890s, the female directed oralist schools and institutions began to organize and host training for their teachers. Both teachers to the deaf and the general public believed that deaf education was the most difficult and challenging job in the field of pedagogy, and as such required higher qualification than regular teachers. Training equipped teachers with the knowledge base and practical application to use the oral method and guide deaf children through the school's program. As oralist teachers gained validity and a reputation as professionals, they sought to legitimize their vocation with field specific journals, regional conferences, and special associations. Oralism was expanding its purview, and the female leaders of the schools and movement continued to push into roles that were not thought possible for women. Caroline Yale, the first principal of the Clarke Institute, received an honorary undergraduate degree from her alma mater Mount Holyoke College and an honorary doctorate from Illinois Wesleyan University. Sarah Fuller, the founder of the Horace Mann Institute for the Deaf, was a co-founder in the American Association of Teaching Speaking to the Deaf. These women and their

contemporaries were recognized for their expertise, with their services in high demand (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006).

In the face of oralism's success, manual institutions declined into a small, impotent minority. Socially, sign language came to be viewed as unseemly slang, and was subsequently banned from schools. As oralism became the status quo, the absence of novelty and radicalism made it just another technique of pedagogy to master, rather than the revolutionary field belonging to women. By the first decade of the twentieth century, men were in positions of leadership at oralist schools across the country. Women were no longer galvanized into action by misogynistic criticisms from manualists, and faculty became evenly balanced between genders.

By the twentieth century, classes specifically for special needs children were a common part of the regular school system. Demand rose for more special education teachers with an expanded range of expertise, and by 1930, training programs for special education teachers were nationwide. Deaf education teachers, meanwhile, were separate from other special education teachers, mostly receiving unofficial and unorganized training from the hiring school. Even in the absence of adequate training, teachers for the deaf were in constant demand. Most deaf education teachers were recruited as recent high school graduates. Female teachers, regardless of training and qualifications, were consistently paid a third less than men in the same positions (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006).

The oralist movement was a powerful campaign spearheaded by women and a catalyst for progression of women's rights at a time when women had no real economic opportunity. Oralism influenced the structure of deaf education by hearing people throughout the century. Many oralist proponents are the reason there are special education classes in schools today. From

the standpoint of hearing history, it was an overall positive chapter of education's history. Deaf history, however, views oralism with hostility and distaste. While the movement generated deaf and special needs education that was sorely needed, oral methodologies were made by hearing people and to benefit hearing people, but levied upon deaf children. Precious time during sensitive periods of development for communication and learning were spent laboriously teaching children a verbal modality, rather than using the mode of language that the Deaf had developed to educate themselves.

## **Part Two: Deaf Women's Challenges**

### **Chapter One: Historical Treatment**

The previous section provided a brief glance into the history of Deaf society as recorded by men, from which women's experiences are generally sidelined. Those who compiled the history are not necessarily to blame, for there are precious few documents from Deaf figures to put together the depth of historical knowledge that we have for the hearing world. The amount of education required in not one, but two language modalities (sign and letters), to write and maintain documents reduced the prevalence of possible documentation. In the papers available, there is even less recorded about Deaf women, let alone written by one. This chapter will serve to fill in the blanks of women's part and experiences in Deaf history that were left by past generations of men.

As with the historical education of hearing women, Deaf women's education was geared toward preparation to be a wife and mother. In fact, most of the hearing world's culture and expectations for girls and women translated directly into the Deaf world: types of chores, lowered academic rigor, limitations on interests (e.g. gardening versus civic responsibility), manners and etiquette, docile and nurturing demeanors, which all began the moment a young girl was old enough to attend school and were reinforced both in society and in the academic world. Such limited curriculum could be found in French, European, and American schools.

There were of course, differences in schools for the deaf beyond pedagogy and unique teaching methods. Three marked differences relate to gender. First, because of the depth of teaching at deaf institutions and the lack of resources by most families of deaf students to either educate their children themselves or to afford to have their child visit frequently, most students

spent ten months out of the year at school. This requirement meant that faculty and staff took their position of *in loco parentis* seriously, in order to reassure parents and provide comfort and authority for their students. In order to model school after a home, dorm mothers were provided, and the predominantly female teachers acted as second mothers to their students. Meanwhile male teachers, management, and administration (only male) functioned as father figures with the authority to discipline. This familial dynamic even bled into the chores assigned by gender at the schools, with organization and supervision provided by staff. Second, the Deaf students were seen as disabled, the lesser counterpart to their hearing peers. Teaching Deaf students was seen as a gargantuan task, so teachers were both praised for their attempt to teach the Deaf and excused for neglect or incompetence because of the arduous nature of the job. In a time where hearing women were already receiving vocational training as nurses, midwives, secretaries, beauticians, and more, Deaf girls were only taught feminine graces and homemaking skills because of their “limited capacity.” Third, the narrow scope of education, combined with the inescapable expectations to marry from both family and society, meant that most Deaf women never saw economic independence or financial security outside of matrimony. These contrasts between male and female curriculum and expectations informed the identities of generations of Deaf students (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006).

Deaf culture and communities have been historically close-knit and detached from the hearing world due to communication barriers and the general treatment Deaf people have experienced. One of the results attributed to this relative isolation is the tendency to cling to outdated gender expectations for far longer than the hearing world, with women remaining in dependent, supportive roles. Most of the educated Deaf experienced three families: the one they were born into, the one made by their school, and the one they created. All three were permanent

structures in Deaf lives because of the strong bonds made through years of sharing their unique experiences and challenges. But for women, success was defined solely by these families- their service in each family, and especially the creation of their own. They were educated and molded to be a sister, a daughter, a wife, a mother. The same can be said of hearing women in their own culture, but again, this belief was more rigorously applied to Deaf women by their own culture, even after societal restrictions eased for hearing women.

### *Deaf Clubs and Organizations*

In order to continue the connection and socialization they experienced in school, Deaf young adults would join a variety of clubs and organizations that functioned as extended families. As organizations became more official, they were run by a hierarchy of Deaf staff and directors, undermining preconceived notions about the limitations of deaf people. The formation of the National Association of the Deaf in 1880 symbolized the formal introduction of Deaf culture as a permanent and prominent part of society.

While the advancement of Deaf culture was a silver lining, the drawback was that the all-male leadership of organizations held deeply conservative views of women and their role. Restrictions against women rose in the form of removing means and opportunity. Almost all positions in clubs and organizations were volunteer, and no woman would have both the financial means and the support of her family or community to take up a significant leadership role. As a result, most women only had roles at the local and regional level.

Deaf women, of course, were not passive when faced with exclusion. They used and developed influence by running social activities within Deaf organizations. In 1909, Deaf women started establishing their own Ladies Auxiliaries en masse in order to provide an association that



was not under the influence of Deaf men. As more state-funded Deaf organizations were established across America throughout the 1920s, women took up executive positions in the organizations, demonstrating they were capable of leadership. However, the average woman with familial responsibilities found her best option to participate in a local club rather than a national association, due to the lower fees and reduced time commitment.

As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, the public reinvigorated its discrimination against the Deaf. This prejudice was reflected in the socioeconomic status of the Deaf workforce. The financial disadvantage was even greater for women, whose salaries were 42% of men's in 1910 and 45% in 1945. By 1973, the disparity had increased to 74% (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006).

### *Progress in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century*

The 1970s are known as the decade in which there were revolutionary advancements in women's rights as well as disability rights. According to data compiled from the 1991 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) and 1972 National Census of the Deaf Population (NCDP) (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006), about 55% of Deaf/ Hard of Hearing (D/HoH) students (both male and female) did not complete high school in 1972, compared to the 47% and 45% for hearing males and females. This disparity is also represented in occupational status. 22% of D/HoH males and 36% of D/HoH females had white collar jobs in 1972, while their hearing counterparts held 40% for males and 54% for females. The NHIS and NCDP included Hard of Hearing in their population because of their hearing status, but delineated their difference from Deaf because of the cultural distinction.

Educational Attainment by Hearing Status and Gender

Gender	Level of Education	1972		1990-1991	
		Hearing	D/HoH	Hearing	D/HoH
Males	Less than high school	47.9%	55.2%	26.7%	43.1%
	College graduate or more	12.1	7.8	19.9	12.1
Females	Less than high school	45.5	55.4	32.6	44.7
	College graduate or more	6.8	4.4	14.6	10.2

Fashioned after: 1972 National Census of the Deaf Population; 1990 & 1991 National Center for Health Statistics, National Health Interview Survey (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006)

By 1990, the data had drastically changed. The number of D/HoH students not completing high school dropped to 43% for males and 45% for females. Meanwhile, the number of white-collar jobs held by D/HoH rose to 36% for men and 62% for women. The percentages increased proportionally in hearing participants as well (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006).

Occupational Attainment by Hearing Status and Gender

Gender	Level of Education	1972		1990-1991	
		Hearing	D/HoH	Hearing	D/HoH
Males	Less than high school	47.9%	55.2%	26.7%	43.1%
	College graduate or more	12.1	7.8	19.9	12.1
Females	Less than high school	45.5	55.4	32.6	44.7
	College graduate or more	6.8	4.4	14.6	10.2

Fashioned after: 1972 National Census of the Deaf Population; 1990 & 1991 National Center for Health Statistics, National Health Interview Survey (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006)

Rather than assume altruistic progress as the causation for the change in survey results, it is important to consider the changes in the educational system, the job market landscape, and the economic environment over two decades. While educational attainment expanded in the overall population throughout the century, for D/HoH students, attainment surged during the aforementioned two decades due to groundbreaking legislation, namely IDEA, or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975. The overarching goal of IDEA was to provide children with disabilities a “free appropriate education” (FAPE) in the “Least Restrictive Environment” (LRE) (Cerney, 2007). Unfortunately, in an effort to socialize IDEA children with “non-handicapped children” at the behest of parents and administrators against separate education, LRE was interpreted to mean mainstreaming students into classrooms where they received little to no support. This forced inclusion was detrimental to all children with disabilities, but especially to deaf children, who were isolated by the absence of peers who were deaf as well as the inability to communicate and comprehend classroom activities. The belief that all children should learn in regular classrooms quickly rooted itself in the education system, deeply hindering the positive impact of IDEA and other special education acts that followed (Cerney, 2007). However, this was the first time that deaf education was legally protected, and the legislation, albeit poorly executed by schools, benefitted deaf children. These children had the opportunity to be introduced to the same materials their hearing peers were, instead of being relegated to a special needs or resource room with ineffective curriculum.

While the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the American Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 prohibited employee discrimination, the legal loopholes and difficulties with enforcing such laws meant the Acts had no real connection to the increase of white-collar jobs for D/HoH. Instead, blue collar jobs that traditionally hired men declined as automation technology advanced, and

improvements in education churned out more qualified workers of both genders for white collar jobs. Even though the quality and changes in education affected D/HoH students as a whole, the collective procurement of higher status occupations was diminished by gender segregation—men and women were steered into appropriate male and female jobs. “Female” white collar positions included teacher, librarian, social worker, nurse, secretary, and some detail-oriented factory work, while “pink” collar positions included childcare, beautician, and waitress. All female vocations had lower status and income than their male counterparts. Additionally, white collar jobs for women may require higher education, but typically only required some college work or trade school. Therefore, D/HoH women’s occupational status became comparable to that of hearing women, with all women held behind men in both categories (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006).

Meanwhile, D/HoH men’s vocational placement was divided evenly between blue and white collar. This clear line is due to the higher level of high school incompleteness and lower levels of college entry and completion. Men’s white-collar jobs typically required possession of university and graduate degrees, since their positions included doctor, lawyer, and executive roles. D/HoH women who held blue collar jobs were able to move into traditionally female white-collar jobs because of education, while men in blue collar jobs did not improve their education enough to move to male white-collar jobs. Furthermore, men would not and could not move into female white-collar jobs or pink-collar jobs.

The NHIS and NCDP data indicate comprehensive improvement for D/HoH women, but not to the point of equality with men regardless of hearing status. Moreover, improvement compared to their counterparts simply illustrates that they had nowhere to go but up, not that their improvement was in any way from a competitive edge. Their progress appears dramatic in

comparison due to their access to rights and opportunities with which others had already been succeeding. Thus, hearing women and men from both hearing states had less margin for growth when given the same improvements in education and better jobs. D/HoH women in the workforce improved in job status to be commensurate with hearing women, but their income did not increase with occupational status as much as the income of D/HoH men with the same level of status change. Even when factoring in education, blue collar jobs historically paid more than pink collar and most female white-collar jobs.

The combined effect of deafness, Deaf culture, and gender on the daily lives of Deaf women is easily ascertained from their educational and vocational circumstances. Socialization, education, income, and opportunities are all altered by prejudice and access. Interestingly, the data indicates that in terms of industry and the job market, workforce members are viewed and valued for their gender first, even before other key factors such as disability (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006). In both professional and personal spheres, navigating these competing markers of difference to form a strong, balanced identity is no easy matter.

## **Chapter Two: Identity in Deaf Women**

The development of identity in an individual is complex and delicate. A budding concept of self can be influenced by any and every experience encountered while growing. To have the implications of “female” and “Deaf” on the mosaic of one’s identity adds hurdles, burdens, and a unique template of interaction with the world that presents challenges to life and development of a stable identity.

According to Erik Erikson, a psychoanalyst who specialized in psychosocial development, personality is formed through a series of eight stages. The first is trust versus mistrust, in which infants from birth to eighteen months learn to trust in their caregiver and immediate surroundings. The second stage is autonomy versus shame and doubt, which is learned as infants eighteen months to three years gain control of physical skills and receive a level of independence to explore. The third stage is initiative versus guilt, as children three to five years old are encouraged to exercise control and project their will onto their environment through activities, tasks, and overcoming obstacles. The fourth stage is industry versus inferiority, molded as five to twelve-year-olds establish their social competencies to their increasingly relevant peer group. The fifth stage is identity versus role confusion, a critical stage where adolescents explore roles and experiment with behavior to cultivate their sense of self. The sixth stage is intimacy versus isolation, as young adults nineteen to forty experiment with intimacy and loving relationships with others, leading to the successful discovery of love. The seventh stage is generativity versus stagnation, in which adults forty to sixty-five work to satisfy their need to create positive changes in others that will outlive them, via mentees or children. The final stage is ego integrity versus despair, as those over sixty-five reflect on their life with satisfaction or regret (Feist et al., 2013).

Based on Erikson's theory, deaf infant girls are likely to encounter challenges experiencing the positive characteristics of identity development due to the communication barrier that limits caretaker interaction, directives, and encouragement until a language modality is established, whether verbal or ASL. As they get older, the progression into independence can be limited or delayed until their security in their environment is formed. The same goes for task completion— if the child or her caretakers reinforce inappropriate limitations because of the

girl's hearing status, then her understanding and competency in both fulfillment and creating plans for activities is negatively restricted. As a Deaf girl grows, establishing social competencies, experimenting or choosing roles, and the continuance of said roles can be affected by how her deafness is a confining onus or a secondary characteristic integrated with her social environments and dynamic with her community.

While many other personality theorists have different names or numbers of stages, they generally follow Erikson's premises. James Marcia expounded on Erikson's theory by providing operational definitions and zeroing in on the development of identity in adolescence. Marcia asserted there were areas of personal significance that require commitment and informed identity: occupation, both vocational and relational, and ideology, such as religion and politics. He added an additional factor, specific to women, that the development of relationships and interpersonal connections require exploration and commitment to roles within a bond.

Rather than stages, the identity phases in Marcia's model were not bound to a strict sequence. Instead, adolescents could experience two or more at the same time, or only a few before establishing their identity. Different phases could affect the status of identity for varying commitments. Marcia's theory allowed for fluid movement along a continuum between identities and phases as variables in life could cause alterations to values and beliefs. The first phase is identity diffusion, in which the teen has neither explored nor committed to an identity, and is passive/ only reacts to experiences as they occur. The next phase is identity foreclosure, a state of low exploration and high commitment to an identity as they accept what they have been taught about occupation and ideology without weighing alternatives. The third phase is moratorium, with high levels of exploration and low levels of commitment— indecision and curiosity. The

final phase is identity achievement, where high degrees of both exploration and commitment produce an identity congruent with their own commitments (Feist et al., 2013).

Based on Marcia's model, young girls who are Deaf must reconcile how their deafness modifies or merges with their roles, beliefs and relationships. Their family, peers, community, and Deaf community offer a set of the aforementioned factors, but it is up to the Deaf girl to determine her place and the place of her deafness in relation to herself. When an adolescent girl who is Deaf is exploring roles, she experiences the same spectrum of decisions as hearing girls: friends, personality traits, interests, political leanings, future goals, and potential vocation. All of these are explored and accepted or discarded in the same way as any hearing girl, but a Deaf girl must determine how she and her views of her hearing status work within a given commitment.

The first social environment, home, is the first place for identity development, before progressing to secondary influences of community, peers and institutions. The influence of the home environment that affects language, cognitive, and overall child development equally impacts psychosocial development. In conjunction with the variables that genetics introduces, the family's socioeconomic status, the parent's occupations and ideologies, approaches to gender roles and sexual behavior, level of education, as well as cultural and community expectations for behavior and roles significantly shape the path and options for young Deaf girls exploring their own identities.

Gender identity, especially in formative years, requires exploration of the roles, expectations, and experiences that come with it. For both hearing and Deaf women, relationships and interpersonal connections are as, if not more, important than occupation and ideology. Love and support from a strong community of loved ones is always beneficial to personality and



identity, and when young girls receive empowerment and approval, they become women who gain interpersonal competence as part of a strong identity. In fact, women tend to enter belief systems and occupation in order to form meaningful connections, usually by helping others or rallying around a cause (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006).

The influences of familial and cultural expectations on a Deaf girl's identity cannot be overstated. The beliefs and attitudes about gender roles expressed by her loved ones significantly affect the construction of her self-esteem and identity. Although many women go on to explore and commit to a healthy identity, those whose relationships and experiences reinforced a negative self-image may struggle with exploring new roles and attaining interpersonal competence, limiting growth and overall satisfaction. Furthermore, the expectations of men, as partners, employees, and other relationships affect and can impinge upon women's safety, financial resources, economic equality, and social status. These relational elements can be seen historically in how Deaf women were culturally groomed and expected to take on diminutive roles. One of the main insights for this project is that today, the world and Deaf culture are far more progressive overall. Nevertheless, gender-based conditioning throughout development continues to be prevalent for Deaf girls.

While Deaf and hearing women explore and develop their identities in the same manner, Deaf women have the ancillary issue of determining their beliefs and attitudes toward their own hearing loss. Parents and the childhood environment are substantial forces on how a child approaches their differences. The parents' own attitudes toward their child's deafness will affect how the child views their worth. Children will also perceive if there is a change of value in the eyes of their parents based on hearing status (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006). If parents do not

see their child as intact and highly capable, girls who are deaf may internalize these views as truth, and are less likely to explore other, more positive identities later on.

### ***Deaf Relationships***

Relationships of all varieties are integral to the human experience, but tend to be more significant, meaningful, and influential for women. Romantic relationships are typically seen as a way to experience such a connection. Romance is undeniably complicated, regardless of the parties involved, but dating and relationships when deaf adds another layer of complexity. In conjunction with the typical qualities to look for in a significant other, Deaf women, or Deaf people of any gender, for that matter, must factor in the hearing status of a potential partner. Young adults who grew up as a part of Deaf culture have traditionally been expected by their communities to marry someone who is Deaf as well (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006). Meanwhile, those who are still wrestling with their deafness and identity may subconsciously or even intentionally seek out a hearing partner as a counterbalance to their feelings of inferiority about their deafness. It is a common occurrence for Deaf people to date hearing people whose parents are Deaf, often referred to as Children of Deaf Adults (CODA). Relationships with CODAs are often the most culturally acceptable way for Deaf people to date outside of their culture, but it brings with it the issue of expectations and goals. Assuming the hearing partner of a person who is Deaf knows ASL, the couple must determine expectations about the hearing partner's role as interpreter between the Deaf partner and the hearing world. It is recommended that a Deaf couple, especially one that includes a CODA, discuss their collective participation in Deaf culture and level of involvement in their Deaf community (Deaf Counseling Center, 2016). As with all couples, Deaf relationships must have clear communication about their wants and needs from one another, including how the couple functions within the Deaf and hearing worlds.

Marriage and a family are not part of everyone's life goals, but when one or both happen for a Deaf person, it is cause for a massive celebration, for the couple's friends and family as well as the Deaf community. All healthy relationships require mutual understanding and agreement on expectations and life goals, as previously mentioned, and one of the most important points of clarity and unity in any marriage or long-term relationship is the decision to have children. For Deaf couples, there is the additional step of forming a plan for the eventuality of a deaf child. While approximately 90% of deaf children are born to hearing families (Gregory et al., 1998), having one or both deaf parents increases the overall likelihood of a deaf or hard of hearing child. Deaf mothers and fathers must make difficult decisions for a deaf child, although they may have more knowledge of their options and empathy for the difficulties that lie ahead of their little one. While families may support personal life choices, Deaf culture tends to enthusiastically encourage Deaf women to marry a Deaf husband, raise Deaf children, and keep the whole family in their local community. Decisions on the child's language, upbringing, family identity, and ensuring acceptability of their child and themselves to society are highly political to Deaf culture and more likely to be determined by the mother (Najarian, 2006). Just as in any socially and linguistically bound group, Deaf culture spreads through its integration into families. The issue is not the encouragement to participate in Deaf culture, a strong and vibrant community, but that the pressure regarding the aforementioned decisions and the social responses to those decisions are directed almost entirely toward Deaf women and mothers. Hearing mothers may experience cultural influence regarding their parenting decisions, but have more opportunity to find a different, more accepting group for their children and themselves. Meanwhile, deaf mothers and their children are more likely to be limited in their options for

socialization groups because of the communicative barrier. This makes cultural expectations regarding parenting decisions especially troublesome.

Deaf women hoping to be parents must plan with their partners for hearing children as well as deaf, especially if one parent has higher or typical levels of hearing. Although many families of blended hearing status often take part in Deaf culture to some degree, CODAs are more likely to spend more time in that community than most especially if siblings or more family members are Deaf. They end up living as both insiders and outsiders to their family's chosen community (Singleton and Tittle, 2000). Parents of CODAs frequently teach them ASL in order to accommodate family communication and facilitate making connections in the community, but must also take care to maintain spoken language throughout infancy and childhood for cognitive, linguistic, and educational development. CODAs often serve as an interpreter for deaf parents in certain situations, but the development of a formal role varies from family to family. It is more likely for a female than a male CODA to fulfill the interpreter role (Moroe and Andrade, 2018). Once a CODA is of school age, Deaf mothers and fathers must decide how to approach education. Their child will likely attend a mainstream school, which provides increased exposure to verbal language. While mainstream placement may be beneficial to a young CODA's linguistic and overall development, Deaf parents may experience difficulty in getting involved in their child's education due to a communication barrier. Furthermore, if the CODA has primarily Deaf friends, she may experience isolation from her peers. The child may feel separated from members of the community and have a sense of living a double life, not belonging in either world. This eventually could result in an identity crisis for any CODA, regardless of age or gender (Brueggemann and Burch, 2006). Trying to do what is best for one's children is a serious and usually difficult charge of parenthood. Deaf mothers, as most parents, would likely be

determined successful parents by their faithful love and support of their children, despite opinions or pushback on parenting decisions from culture or family.

Regardless of the roles they choose, Deaf women face unique challenges because of their differences and development. The difficulties of a communication barrier and the additional obstacles of gender labels from society only add to the burdens of a Deaf woman, who already carries the titles of professional, girlfriend, wife, and mother. Meanwhile, Deaf culture compels Deaf women to be the ideal Deaf woman, who lives almost exclusively within her Deaf community and adheres to societal expectations for females. These hurdles are separate from race, religion, socioeconomic status, and other characteristics that face prejudice. The best way to offer support as hearing individuals to Deaf women is to promote their voices and platforms that support them, as well as using our own voices and platforms to advocate for social reform or institutions that work to benefit Deaf women.

### **Part Three: Personal Accounts From Deaf Women**

#### **Chapter One: Life Experiences**

As the author of this thesis is a hearing female, it is irresponsible to speak to the issues Deaf women face without also including the personal histories of Deaf women. Although the accounts of individuals are qualitative data, they convey psychological and narrative information that illustrates the strength of those women who are succeeding and leading fulfilled lives in the face of daily challenges.

#### ***Rebecca Dadey***

Rebecca Dadey is a professor at Onondaga Community College, teaching ASL and ASL literature and film. When she was eight months old, doctors told her parents that she was deaf and would likely never read beyond a fourth-grade level (a common assumption even today). Her parents, fortunately, chose to ignore the doctor and instead introduced her to ASL and English. Her bilingualism provided her opportunities to learn and flourish in and out of the classroom, as her family traveled and explored to provide her with positive worldly experiences. Dadey also received critical support in her early childhood from interactions and friendships with Deaf children and adults at Gallaudet University. The adults became Deaf role models who introduced her to her Deaf culture and inspired confidence in her own Deafness. From this strong support system and educational background, Dadey went on to earn her bachelor's and master's degrees, solidifying her identity as a Deaf woman prepared for the world and life ahead of her.

In her daily life, she still encounters a hearing world that expects her to be low functioning based on stereotypes. Dadey knows that her experiences of poor treatment, rejection,

and even prejudice are something that most people who are Deaf go through when interacting with the hearing world. She utilizes her inner strength and self-confidence to respond to them politely and defy their expectations. She continues to defy assumptions about her limits by constantly pushing herself out of her comfort zone. A dedicated triathlete, professor, wife, and mother, Dadey draws on her experiences of growing up and succeeding with her Deaf identity to push herself to new heights. She hopes to inspire the people in her life to work hard and achieve the goals that were thought to be impossible (TED, 2017).

### ***Rachel Kolb***

Rachel Kolb is profoundly deaf and chose to learn verbal communication as a child. She has mastered speech through eighteen years of intensive speech therapy in which she learned how to form phonemes and sounds from feeling the vibrations and positions from her therapist's mouth and throat. In spite of her years of work and success in other areas of life, there were many, including herself, who thought that there were limits to her speaking ability and her future as a Deaf person. In her TEDx talk, she shares a specific memory of giving an oral presentation in class that she thought went well, only to have her teacher chastise her for forcing her audience to listen to her without an interpreter. She was of course, devastated, but chose to ignore this and other negative experiences. Kolb began to focus on her strengths and see herself as abled rather than disabled. She chose to tackle her challenges instead of seeing them as permanent barriers in life. She acknowledges she never would have come to this perspective about herself and her capabilities without support from many others. Kolb's parents are both hearing, and had never dealt with the deaf world before their daughter. However, they loved her and valued communication with her, so they gave her the tools of speech therapy and ASL. Neither they nor her therapists, interpreters, and friends labeled or treated her as disabled, and thus she never

identified herself as such. Kolb admits that she has always struggled with large group conversations. In order to follow what everyone is saying, she must filter out background activity and noise while keeping up with verbal conversations by lipreading. It is easy for her to get overwhelmed and believe that a normal social life is beyond her limits. However, she knows that she does not get to choose how difficult something is for her, but she has control over how she uses her abilities to conquer obstacles. She has continued to overcome challenges and limitations, and is a talented equestrian, writer, and Stanford graduate. She encourages everyone, especially other Deaf people, to reject the voice in their head that says what they can or cannot do. They have the power to push past their own disbelief in order to explore and accomplish their goals (TED, 2013).

### ***Jackie Roth***

Jackie Roth is an actress and a third generation Deaf New Yorker. Growing up, her parents had a hard time accepting her Deafness despite having deaf relatives on both sides of the family. She went to a public school, which at the time did not have assistance or a program for mainstreaming deaf children into a hearing classroom. New York was oralism-based during her education, and it caused much shame from her and other Deaf peers to use sign language. Moving past her bad experiences with hearing schools, Roth pushed herself to receive higher education and a career in acting. After hard work at the local level, she earned a spot on the touring company for the Broadway play “Children of a Lesser God” in 1980. Roth’s experience throughout years in hearing theatre led to the realization that while she loves her line of work and bringing representation through Deaf characters, she wishes that writers and directors would take a greater risk on Deaf roles, giving more depth to their lives beyond their hearing status. A personal highlight in her career was producing a documentary film about cochlear implants over



the course of 1999-2000, just as the FDA was considering changing the age limit for cochlear implants from two years to one year old. She was the only Deaf person on the production team, working closely with all the content and translating every interview for the film. In her interview with Deaf Women in Film, Roth encourages Deaf female artists to make their success happen, not just wait for it to happen. She also wants to bolster cooperation within the Deaf artist community (Deaf Women in Film, 2011).

### ***Beth Barbiers***

Beth Barbiers is a versatile outside back or forward for the U.S. Deaf Soccer Women's National Team (USDSWNT). As an introverted child, nobody, including herself, knew she was hard of hearing. Naturally athletic, she started soccer at fifteen to find something more engaging than her years of track. She decided to be the goalie since she had such a late start in soccer, and stubbornly kept that role through high school despite ruthless training from her coach. It was not until she failed the hearing test when attempting to join the Marines that she found out that she had otosclerosis and would be deaf within the year. Barbiers adjusted her future and went to college on several academic and athletic scholarships. She did not go deaf in the year, and the problem was forgotten as she continued to have a successful college career. At twenty-two, she bought hearing aids, and as her hearing diminished, she simply turned up the volume. Her situation made her a candidate for and recipient of a surgery intended to correct otosclerosis. However, after four surgeries, there was no improvement. In fact, less than a month later, she woke up profoundly deaf overnight. Doctors later discovered she did not have otosclerosis, but a rare disease called Semicircular Canal Dehiscence. Suddenly isolated and struggling to find support, she turned to sports for stability. She discovered the USDSWNT, received an email asking about her soccer experience. After a second email with an invitation to a training camp,

Barbiers attended at the encouragement of her local club. The camp was to be her first experience with other Deaf people, and since that first camp, her new teammates have become her dearest friends. The inclusivity and relationships she built have eradicated the feelings of isolation, loss, and otherness she experienced growing up. As a “late deafened”, the term used in Deaf culture for someone who loses their hearing later in life, she has had to work to improve her ASL, but she is diligent in learning so she can better communicate with her teammates. Barbiers also represented Team USA in track and field at the 2017 Deaflympics (USDSWNT, n.d.).

### *Claudia Gordon*

Claudia Gordon was the first female Deaf African American to graduate from law school. After losing her hearing at the age of eight, Gordon faced discrimination in her native country of Jamaica until she was able to come to America to further her education. While in high school, she realized her desire for a profession in law. She never let any fear, doubt, or labels hold her back. She used her abilities on her path to success, regardless of difficulties presented by deafness. Gordon attended Howard University, famous for its excellence and history as a Historically Black College or University, and completed her law degree at American University. After graduation, she went to work with Homeland Security as a senior policy advisor. During her tenure, she served as the vice president for the National Black Deaf Advocates in 2004, and as enforcer of executive orders for emergency preparedness for all individuals with disabilities during the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina. She was also the recipient of the Paul G. Hearne/AAPD award, bestowed by the American Association of People with Disabilities. Her most famous accomplishment is her position as public administration advisor on the disability community to the Obama administration. Today, she has a senior executive role at Sprint over the accessibility and communication features specifically designed to enable and facilitate cell

phone usage for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Gordon is grateful for the principles learned in her early years that taught her to never let voices of uncertainty define her value or set her limitations. She enjoys using her talents to help others develop their own self-confidence and utilizing her position and influence to advocate for acceptance and inclusion of people with disabilities in society (Respectability, 2018).

### ***Meriah Nichols***

Meriah Nichols is a counselor, teacher, blogger, and single mother of three children, one of whom has Down syndrome. She has lived with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) for most of her life after a car accident at four years old and two more accidents later on in life. In spite of the TBI, the resulting deafness, auditory processing disorder, and depression, her family did not assume she was disabled because nothing was visibly wrong. They did not see the need to provide her with help or support. Nichols spent her teens and twenties trying to avoid the stereotypes surrounding disability and adhere to her impossible standard of “normal”. However, after accepting a job running a program for disabilities at UC Berkeley, Nichols began to accept and even call herself disabled as she encountered strength, accomplishment, and happiness from people with all manner of disability. Now, she is proud of her life and the role disability plays in it. She has since moved to Hawaii to be a counselor, and uses her blog to connect people with disabilities to tools, resources, and services that maximize their potential and success in life. As a mother, she adores spending time with her three children, and is proud to show them what it means to succeed with disabilities, but acknowledges that she faces several challenges as a Deaf mom. Nichols felt this pain acutely when her youngest child, who has Down syndrome, returned from speech therapy and said “mommy” for the first time, but she did not hear it. She also worries about her ability to hear when her children try to talk to her, whether it is for basic needs,

attention, or serious issues. While hearing aids enable some communication with her hearing community, the non-stop work of a single mother leaves her feeling just as isolated as she would be in her unaided, deafened state. Motherhood is much more strenuous when communication is limited and taxing, so responsibilities such as managing her children's schedules require more time and energy. Nichols loves the sensation of her serene and silent world, but also feels the loss of interaction it costs her (MeriahNichols, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

As in all walks of life, being a Deaf woman is a multidimensional experience. No one account or personal history will perfectly encapsulate it. However, from the experiences above, we see that most Deaf women's challenges involve struggling with communication, overcoming feelings of isolation, and battling doubt or limitations imposed by others and themselves for their differences. Many do not receive personal or developmental support from their hearing families out of ignorance or negative attitudes, while others receive love and encouragement to succeed. Young women who are introduced to Deaf culture are elated to meet people like them and create strong ties to their community as a result.

Deafness and the female experience fuse to create the unique reality of Deaf women, which is rife with challenges based upon the two labels. Historical treatment, educational and occupational hindrances, and family and community expectations profoundly affect lives of Deaf women at every level. The best way for the hearing individual to help Deaf women is to self-educate on deafness and Deaf culture, to voluntarily accommodate environments, and to put forth effort into attempting to communicate and connect. Those with power and influence should promote and ensure that women, Deaf communities, and people with disabilities are involved and authoritative at every level of decision- and policy making, especially policies and decisions directly concerning themselves.

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