

**ADVOCACY IN THE DEAF COMMUNITY:
The Experience in the United States of America
By Rev. Joseph A. Mulcrone**

SPRING, 2003: The State of Illinois Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons is meeting in Springfield, the capital of Illinois. The Director of the Commission is a deaf man, an employee of the State. There are five other paid employees, all of whom are skilled in Sign Language. This is a public meeting with the government-appointed Commission members. Of the nine Commissioners, eight are deaf or hard of hearing; one is deaf/blind. The discussion that day covers a variety of topics: certification by the State of Sign Language Interpreters, mental health services for deaf persons, cochlear implants, and special education programs.

Attending the meeting are various representatives of agencies and organizations serving deaf people in Illinois, as well as ordinary citizens just interested in the meeting. About half of those in attendance are deaf. The meeting is conducted with certified Sign Language Interpreters, real-time captioning, and a variety of assistive listening devices. Many of the deaf participants have college degrees. At break-time, many of the deaf participants hurry outside to check their pagers and text-message communicators for calls. During the day-long meeting, there are constant references to Deaf Culture, Deaf Pride, Deaf Empowerment.

SPRING, 1953: I was seven years old. My maternal grandparents, Laurence & Josephine Fay, were deaf. Grandma Fay was a sweet & loving lady who spoiled me and was an ongoing source of smiles & ice cream cones. One day, we were walking down a street near her home. A man approached us and handed my grandmother a card, then waited. My grandmother blew up in anger. Even though I could not understand her furious signing, I could see the color draining from the face of the man. He tried to sign back; my grandmother would have none of it. He ran away. I had never – NEVER! – seen her like that!

Later, I asked my mother about the incident. My mother explained that the man was a deaf beggar who gave Grandma a “A-B-C” sign language card, asking for a contribution to a poor “deaf and dumb” man. My grandmother told him he should be ashamed of himself, that he should find work. More than that, Grandma told him that his actions made hearing people look down on the deaf, and THAT WAS WRONG!

My introduction, at a young age, to Deaf Culture, Deaf Pride, Deaf Empowerment!

A SHORT HISTORY OF ADVOCACY IN THE DEAF COMMUNITY: Over the last fifty years, there has been a remarkable advancement in the lives of deaf people in the United States. While there are many reasons for this advancement, three areas deserve special attention.

First, POLITICAL ADVOCACY: Because of this effort, we have laws that recognize the rights that Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing people have to live as citizens in our society. In the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans fought for laws to give them equal rights in our country. In the 1960s and 1970s, women struggled to receive guaranteed freedoms under the law. From the 1960s to 1980s, persons with disabilities strongly pushed for laws that would give them equal access to the benefits of living in this country. This campaign is wonderfully documented in the book NO PITY, by Joseph Shapiro (Random House, Inc.; Sept. 1994). Out of that history of political advocacy came THREE important laws.

- A) The special education legislation passed in the 1960s, which we call the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).
- B) The Rehabilitation Act of 1971 (popularly know as law 504), which recognized the concept of equal access to services for people with disabilities.
- C) The Americans with Disabilities Act, signed into law July 26, 1990. This law has had a tremendous impact on the life of Deaf persons regarding access to interpreting services, telecommunications, and employment.

Second, EDUCATION: The passage of laws in the 1960s regarding the educational rights of persons with disabilities in our society changed the entire approach to education for deaf and hard-of-hearing children. The Special Education Laws demand that children with disabilities be given the right to the same educational opportunities that non-disabled students have. For deaf students, this has meant: Sign Language Interpreters in schools, assistive listening devices, mainstreaming with hearing students, special educational cooperatives, full participation in university programs.

Third, TECHNOLOGY: The list continues to grow and change: TTYs (and Relay Phone Services), closed captioning on television and in more movie theaters, facsimiles, computers, the Internet, text message pagers, video-interpreting and communication via television, cochlear implants. Technology is having a huge impact on the Deaf community, though not all of the effect is positive.

Two other "events" during this time were very important in this history. These events created a sense of pride in the deaf community, and educated hearing people, in a positive way, to the real lives and concerns of deaf persons:

- A) In 1986, the movie "Children of a Lesser God" was showing in movie theaters all over the United States. Based on a play with the same title, the movie introduced millions of hearing people to deaf people who were attractive, funny, capable, and badly misunderstood by their families and even those who wanted to "help" the deaf. Ms. Marlee Matlin, who won an Academy Award for her performance, opened the eyes of the hearing community (and continues to do so) to the notion that "it's okay to be deaf!"
- B) In the Spring of 1988 (fifteen years ago), the deaf students at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, protested against the decision of the University Board to appoint another hearing person to be the

president of that university. The students began the "Deaf President Now" (DPN) movement. Despite opposition from all areas, the students refused to give up. On national TV and in the newspapers and magazines, hearing people saw a group of reasonable, articulate, thoughtful young people arguing for what they believed was justice. Most hearing people came to believe that the students were right. Since 1988, there has been a deaf president at Gallaudet University, I. King Jordan.

All the above, and many other factors, have brought us to the present moment for deaf people in the United States today. The situation for Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons has both positive and negative aspects.

POSITIVE:

- A) More opportunities for deaf people in education, employment, and participation in life and society.
- B) More power to fight discrimination, injustice, inequality.
- C) More acceptance by the hearing world; less stereotyping.
- D) More self-esteem on the part of deaf people.
- E) More ability to access information.
- F) More access to services for mental health, addiction treatment, domestic violence prevention, etc.
- G) More awareness on the part of political leaders that deaf people and persons with disabilities can vote.

NEGATIVE:

- A) Many myths, false ideas related to deafness still exist in society.
- B) Discrimination, inequality, injustice continue to impact the lives of many deaf persons.
- C) Victimization of deaf persons: abuse, criminal activity, sexual exploitation.
- D) Lack of research and information on deafness.
- E) Loss of cohesion (sense of unity) in the deaf community.
- F) Still a lack of equal access to many services and opportunities in our society.
- G) Success in advocacy has not necessarily translated into happiness for deaf Persons; a continuing sense of isolation haunts the lives of many people.

Advocacy is a willingness to struggle, to persevere (be stubborn!), to use wise tactics, to form alliances - all because we believe something is worth fighting for. Over the last fifty years, we have seen a number of people - hearing, hard of hearing, and deaf - unite to achieve some remarkable results in our community.

ROLE OF THE CHURCH:

The old model of advocacy was that hearing people would fight for the rights of deaf persons. Then, the model changed to hearing people advocating for and with deaf people. Now, the model is that deaf people must advocate for

themselves, the role of hearing people is to be a source of support and resources (material, technical, educational).

The Catholic pastoral workers in the United States have had a strong record of supporting deaf persons. This is extremely important. Why? Because we cannot expect deaf people to be a part of the Church if the Church is not with them in their struggles. Again, the old model was that the priest or religious sister or dedicated lay leader - all hearing - would do the advocacy work. Now, that role has changed. We must provide support, resources, training so that deaf people can advocate for each other. They will make mistakes. It is the only way we learn. MINISTRY in this area means the work of encouragement, solidarity, prayer, listening, and the use of material supports such as providing space, publicity for advocacy efforts, etc. There is, however, another aspect to our ministry in this effort. Advocacy will always involve frustration, disappointments, losses: a certain "dying" that happens. As Church, we are the people who offer a deep sense of Hope, a trust that in the end there is a Resurrection and a birth to New Life.

CONCLUSION:

Advocacy, the deaf community, technology, laws promoting equal rights in this society. We have come a long way in 50 years.

My grandmother could not imagine all this. Here we are, a group of people from different countries, gathered together with multiple interpreters, working our laptop computers, discussing these issues. My grandmother was a simple, hard-working woman with a deep faith in God and a genuine sense of pride in herself. How we got here was beyond anything she could have dreamed of.

But it is people like her who got all this started. Somewhere, I know she is smiling.

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